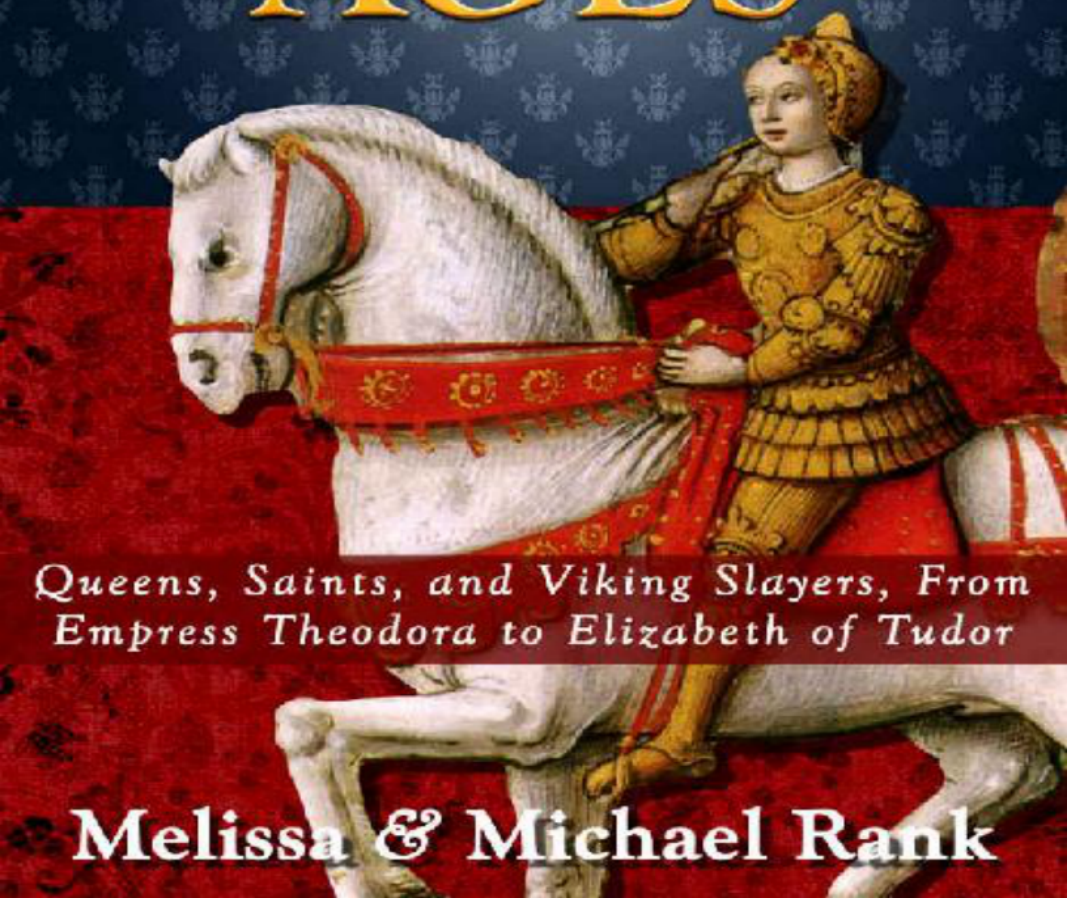
The Most Powerful Women in the Middle Ages

Rank, Michael
Rank, Melissa

VISIT...

THE MOST POWERFUL WOMEN *in the* MIDDLE AGES



Queens, Saints, and Viking Slayers, From Empress Theodora to Elizabeth of Tudor

Melissa & Michael Rank

The Most Powerful Women in the Middle Ages: Queens, Saints, and Viking Slayers, From Empress Theodora to Elizabeth of Tudor

By Melissa & Michael Rank

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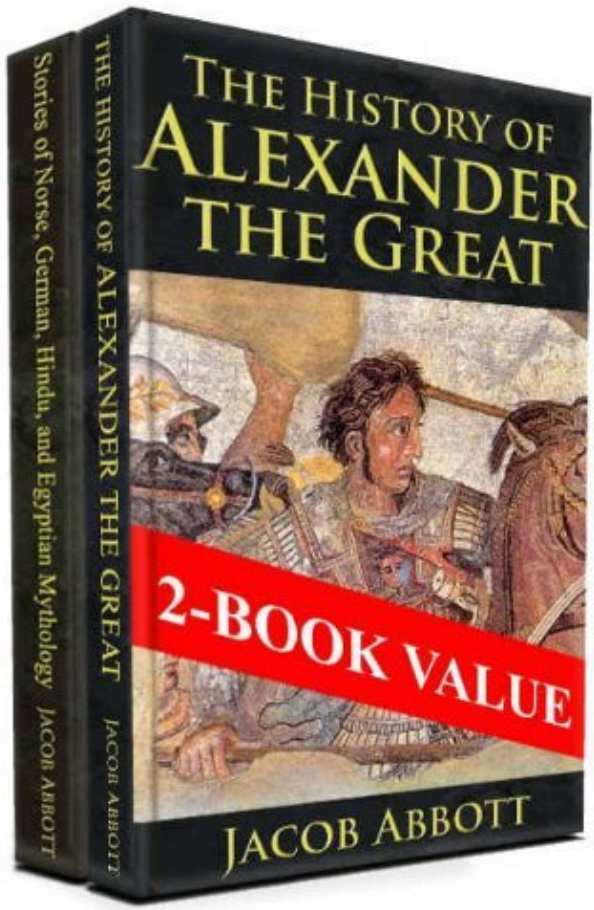
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Best,

Melissa and Michael

Introduction

The Fairer Sex in a Time of Captivity?

The story of women taking over the duties of their husbands in factories and homes during times of war is a familiar one. While he was deployed overseas to stop a foreign dictator from world conquest, she was placed in charge of the household. In the past, she depended on her husband's paycheck for all their material needs. Now, for the first time, she was solely in charge of the family's finances. She was also responsible for new duties such as simple home repairs and overseeing improvement projects.

Money was tight at this time, so before long, she rented out her home's empty rooms to lodgers and prepared them meals. The modest revenue was used to upgrade its furnishings and maybe add an additional room. Soon the lodging business grew. To accommodate her growing clientele, the housewife started hiring support staff.

Without her realizing it, she had suddenly becoming a manager. Her business had transformed into the equivalent of a small hotel and restaurant. To guard her capital she purchased a gun, since the lodging was in an unsafe location. After a few lessons at the local range, she had become a proficient markswoman. On one occasion she was even forced to stop a criminal foolish enough to cross her doorpost.

When her husband finally returned from the war, he expected to meet his meek housewife still caught up in her domestic duties. Instead, he encountered a savvy entrepreneur who had come to enjoy all the benefits of wealth creation and independence. She started to ask why she could not have experienced this condition earlier in her life. Soon she encountered like-minded women who wanted similar social recognition. They organized, and within a few short years, these women started to make their voices heard across society.

Does this sound like the story of women mobilizing in America and Europe between World War II and the 1960s? It may, but it is actually a description of England in the 1400s. There, Margaret Paston of Norwich was a rich heiress who managed Caister Castle in Norfolk. Her husband was Sir John Paston, a lawyer who spent several months each year in London at the courts.

Margaret supervised the vast estate; organized the castle's defense; its brewery, bakery, and stables; made medicine; watched over the sick; and even arranged the marriages of those living in her household. When in 1448, political rival Lord Moleyns attempted to claim a house on her lands by force, she readied the men-at-arms.

Margaret wrote to her husband requesting crossbows, arrows, and poleaxes. She had to fight 1,000 armed men who had entered her fortified residence with battering rams. Margaret was carried off, and later returned when the family dispute was resolved, but she had shown herself to be of a rather tough mettle.

This story is not what most people expect when they think of women in the Middle Ages. The image that springs to mind is a damsel in distress who sits in a high tower wearing a traffic-cone for a hat and who waits for a knight to rescue her from her captors. Once freed by this knight, she is shoved into a forced marriage, breeds sons for her husband, and keeps her mouth shut in public. If not, she is scorned by the village for the sin of being a woman that expresses independent thought. If she continues in her mortal sin, the male priests consent to have her burned at the stake as a witch, because that is what people did in the Dark Ages.

If our hypothetical woman was of a lower social standing or a peasant in this imaginary medieval world, then she had absolutely no legal rights. Other community members regarded her as much as they did the livestock – a piece of property to be bought and sold. If she were beaten, enslaved, tortured, or killed, then kings and church leaders turned a blind eye. They considered her at best a necessary component for procreation, and at worst a tool of the devil and a signpost on the road to damnation.

Such ideas about the Middle Ages are dominant, and they would be very convincing if not for the fact that they are almost completely fictional. It is true that women typically had fewer legal and social rights as men in the Middle Ages. But the idea that the period from 500 to 1500 AD was a time of stagnation is based more on the ideology of historians in recent times than any truth about the past.

“The Dark Ages” was invented during the Enlightenment Period as a way for scholars to look upon the past as a period of less-developed civilization. Protestant scholars in particular depicted this period in this way due to the corruption of the Catholic Church. They saw the

popes as pagan kings who ruled through superstition and moral hypocrisy. They were unreasonable and barbaric.

The more romantic depictions of medieval women, knights, chivalry, and jousting tournaments come from the period of Romanticism, which originated in modern Western Europe. Medieval costumes and symbols became all the rage in the 19th century. German emperors dressed up in such clothing at public balls. Ludwig II of Bavaria built his famous fairy-tale castle at Neuschwanstein in 1868, which is the direct inspiration for the iconic castle at Walt Disney World. These accoutrements of medieval life can be seen today at events organized by the Society for Creative Anachronism.

In Victorian England, the ruling class held reenactments of tournaments. They donned their best imitation of medieval dress at royal and aristocratic masquerades and balls. Jousting tournaments were held. And the idea of a passive lady-in-waiting that existed throughout the Middle Ages solidified in the public consciousness, even if it was a modern fiction. This mythical woman wore a medieval gown, but she had all the virtues of a Victorian lady who espoused sexual restraint, was kept in idle luxury, and held a strict social code of conduct.

As a result, the concept of a real medieval woman is misunderstood because history of this era has largely been filtered through Victorian ideals. This was a time in which British females lacked suffrage rights or the ability to own property. It is from this time that the image of a woman wearing a traffic-cone hat while sitting wistfully by a window emerged.

There is a second misconception of medieval women that is equally wrong. It comes from committing one of the simplest mistakes when studying history: dividing its characters into heroes and villains, and imagining the former to be essentially modern people trapped in the past. The former are thought to be visionaries that could see the 21st century from their lofty vantage points in history. They did their best to nudge society in this direction and were often punished for their foresight. They dreamed of equal rights, constitution democracy, universal suffrage, and fair wage laws for women. The villains, in contrast, want to inhibit reform, human rights, and the inevitable march of progress. As they sat in their castles and twirled their mustaches, they schemed of keeping society in its backward state and dragging it even further in the past. They hoped to deny women their rights out of pure misogyny. As a result, they are the forefathers of

civilization's enemies today, whether it be jihadis in the Middle East or fundamentalists in America.

As a result, modern-day academic historians, in an attempt to give medieval women a stronger voice, have essentially turned the most notable women of this era into 21st century feminists. Joan of Arc is credited with challenging the gender norms of her era by wearing men's armor into combat and cutting her hair short. Catherine of Siena is imagined to have challenged the patriarchal world of the Catholic Church by sending letters of rebuke to the pope. Anna Komnene, the world's first female narrative historian, is thought to have crafted her history for the sole purposes of giving a stronger voice to women.

These females are imagined to be proto-feminists and the predecessors of later advocates like the suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt. They are thought to be part of a long, unbroken chain that brought women from their lowly position in the “Dark Ages” to their current position in the 21st century. Such a description of these women forces a narrative upon them and imagines that all powerful females of the past were truly modern women in medieval garb. If they only had the means, then they would have eliminated legal and social gender distinctions in society.

But we do not see such sentiments in any accounts of these women's lives. No woman under consideration in this book, or anyone else, challenged the idea of a patriarchal world. Catherine of Siena may have rebuked popes, but she never called on them to install female priests or bishops. Joan of Arc may have dressed as a man in combat, but she preferred to wear a dress while in prison and forbade other women from joining her in battle. She believed that her circumstances were unique since she had been called by God.

Not even the most powerful queens in Europe desired to produce legislation to make the sexes completely equal before the law. This was true among rulers such as Eleanor of Aquitaine – among the richest landholders in medieval Europe – and Queen Elizabeth, who commanded entire armies and ordered men to their death by the thousands. Even Margaret I of Denmark, who managed to unify Scandinavia, acquiesced to a political system in which she was forced to rule through a male relative.

This, however, does not take away from the extraordinary accomplishments of the women under consideration in this book. Even

though they did not seek to upend the male-dominated world in which they lived, it is clear that they were not damsels in distress. Many of them were the most powerful leaders of their time. Lady Aethelflaed personally led armies into direct combat with Vikings and saved England from foreign invasion. Empress Theodora kept the Byzantine Empire from falling apart during wide-scale rioting and stopped her husband and his council from fleeing Constantinople. Catherine of Siena almost single-handedly restored the papacy to Rome and was one of the few people who could negotiate with all sides in the divisive and brutal world of Italian politics.

This book will look at the lives of the ten greatest women in the Middle Ages. Whether it is the famed scholar Anna Komnene; Margaret I of Denmark, who unified Scandinavia; or Ottoman Queen Mother Kösem Sultan, who ruled the Islamic empire through three of her sons; all these women held extraordinary levels of power at a time when women were thought to not have any.

It will explore how they managed to acquire power, what made their accomplishments so notable, and the impact they had on their respective societies after their deaths. It will also describe the historical background of these women, their cultures, and what about it helped or hindered their rise.

Their stories still echo down to today. They are a testimony to the resiliency of individuals to accomplish extraordinary things, even if society puts on them enormous constraints. Furthermore, their story shows that the medieval world was not as oppressive as we imagine it to be.

Let us look now at the lives of the 10 most power women of the Middle Ages.

Chapter 1

Empress Theodora (500-548): The Circus Prostitute Who Reformed an Empire

The drama of a husband-and-wife power couple that rules an empire cannot help but be captivating. Whether Marc Antony and Cleopatra, Ferdinand and Isabella, or Bill and Hillary Clinton, the prospect of two ambitious leaders whose personal relationship and jealousies are in danger of spilling into state policy makes for riveting character studies.

In the case of Byzantine Empress Theodora, she is nearly as famous as her husband Justinian, quite a feat considering that he ruled the empire at the peak of its power and influenced it centuries after his death. She is famous for coming from humble origins and rising to the second-highest position in the empire. Her life story is also a strong rebuke to those that argue women from lower social levels had no rights or possibilities of upward mobility in the early Middle Ages.

And what lowly origins they were. According to Procopius's Secret History, written shortly after Theodora's death, the empress-to-be started her career performing in the circus, which was the ancient equivalent of being a Vegas showgirl. She gained fame for performing lewd acts on stage. According to legend, Theodora danced with nothing more than a ribbon and even allowed geese to peck out grain from her – *ahem* – "midsection."

Procopius, probably writing with furrowed brow at this point, says that she "seemed to glory in the performance with no shame, for she was not only impudent herself, but endeavored to make everybody else as audacious."

This was his indirect way of saying that Theodora took on many lovers, all at the same time. He writes that she even wished that nature had endowed her with the biological ability to service even more men at once. Procopius was a fierce anti-Justinian partisan and his account is far more of a polemic against the empress than historical truth. But it does suggest his displeasure that a woman of such a humble background was able to wield so much power.

Theodora was born in 500 AD to Acacius, a bear-keeper of the

Hippodrome of Constantinople. Her mother was a dancer and actress, and her sister Comito took up these careers as well. Acacius died when she was five and her new father-in-law could not support the family. So her mother committed Theodora and her two sisters to Constantinople's Hippodrome after she formally requested a job for their new stepfather. She gave the girls basic instruction in dance to find jobs as entertainers. Young Theodora was immediately thrown into life among the city's most disorderly citizens.

At the time the imperial capital was a raucous site hardly more civilized than in its Roman days, even though it had exchanged paganism for Christianity centuries earlier. The city was broken off into factions that resembled English football hooligans – the Greens and the Blues, two groups that descended from Roman chariot racer teams. By the sixth century they had evolved into early political parties that stood for different branches of Christian theology. However, they were still as violent as their gladiator enthusiast forefathers and often resorted to bloody rioting. The Blues were the upper class that stood for the Chalcedonian belief that Christ had a human and divine nature. The Greens were the worker's party and believed in Monophysitism, a heresy that Christ had only one nature and was not simultaneously human and divine. This was the crucible that young Theodora grew up in. Despite her poor background, she became an avid Blue since they offered work to her father-in-law when the Greens ignored their plight.

By age 15 she was an acting star of the Hippodrome – a huge complex that could hold 30,000 and offered all forms of licit and illicit entertainment. It was the dark underbelly of the city; the red-light district of Constantinople. As a result, attaining notoriety as an actress in such a place required a female to debase herself in many ways. Comito took up prostitution first and Theodora soon followed. The vocational transition was not a significant one at this time. The two words ‘actress’ and ‘prostitute’ were nearly synonymous and the two girls soon made a name for themselves in both fields.

For both young women, they soon saw that an upward career path lay outside the Hippodrome and in the arms of powerful politicians. Theodora was mistress to the Syrian official Hecebolus at 16, remaining with him for four years in the Libyan Pentapolis where he served as governor. She was mistreated by him and then abandoned while returning to Constantinople.

Theodora then settled in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria, a major

Christian center and international commercial hub. There she had a religious awakening when she met Patriarch Timothy, a devout Monophysite. One account says she also received theological instruction from Severus, Patriarch of Antioch, who had fled Monophysite persecution. This education came to impact the empire when she was crowned empress years later.

She returned to Constantinople in 522, renouncing her old life and turning to the trade of a wool spinner. As luck would have it, she worked near the royal palace and caught the attention of young Justinian, next in line to the Byzantine throne, currently held by his uncle Justin I. He was likely captivated by her looks and engaging intelligence.

Edward Gibbon describes Theodora's striking beauty in the following way: “Her features were delicate and regular; her complexion, though somewhat pale, was tinged with a natural color; every sensation was instantly expressed by the vivacity of her eyes; her easy motions displayed the graces of a small but elegant figure; and either love or adulation might proclaim, that painting and poetry were incapable of delineating the matchless excellence of her form.”

She quickly won his heart and became Justinian's concubine as he pampered her with gifts from across the empire. Justine desired to make her his wife, but Roman law forbade a senator from marrying one from a debased profession such as the theatre. Emperor Justin's wife Euphemia outright rejected having a prostitute as a niece, leaving Justinian to wait for the death of the empress in 525.

At this point the nuptial prohibition was lifted, and the two wed. Following their marriage, Justinian donned the imperial purple at his royal coronation, the patriarch of Constantinople placed the diadem on the heads of the emperor and empress, and the former prostitute was now adulated by Byzantium's bishops, magistrates, and generals.

Theodora entered the imperial palace in 527 during a time of tremendous political and legal reform in Byzantium that was instituted by Justinian. He was a pivotal figure that bridged the world of antiquity and the early medieval world. He reacquired Roman lands in Europe that were lost a century ago to Vandal and Ostrogothic invasions.

Once again the Roman Empire stretched out to the Atlantic Ocean, bringing in vast amounts of tribute from the reconquered territory. He

also rewrote the Roman law, the *Corpus Juris Civilis.* It is still the basis of civil law in many of the empire's descendant states. And in the middle of this rapidly ascending empire and the implementation of these far-reaching changes was an empress whose husband viewed her as an equal and sought her advice frequently.

All these expensive Byzantine wars gave Theodora the first opportunity to truly demonstrate her power. To raise the funds for such massive expeditions, Justinian's finance minister John of Cappadocia introduced 26 new taxes, many of which fell on the wealthy. Anger at the imperial center for higher taxes merged with already-volatile social conditions after Justinian had harshly reacted to fighting between the Greens and the Blues in the capital.

The Greens resented being rebuffed by the couple. The Blues, who were generally liked by Justinian and Theodora, believed their favor had been withdrawn. They had managed to earn the scorn of both sides. At the next chariot race, the two factions shouted *Nika! Nika!* ("Win! Win!"), normally a cheer for their favorite charioteer, in defiance of the government.

Soon they poured into Constantinople's inner city with the threat of burning it down. They torched opulent buildings of the capital, including the church in which the royal couple was wed. The mob even proclaimed a new emperor, Hypatius, the nephew of former emperor Anastasius I.

Justinian and his officials prepared to flee for their lives from the palace. As they gathered their possessions, one figure stood between them and the exit. It was the former circus performer. They were rebuked by the fearless empress for their cowardice and admonished hold their ground. She gave an impassioned speech concerning the virtues of fighting to maintain power rather than living as an exile: "If you, my lord, wish to save your skin, you will have no difficulty in doing so. We are rich, there is the sea, and there too are our ships. But consider first whether, when you reach safety, you will regret that you did not choose death in preference. As for me, I stand by the ancient saying: the purple is the noblest winding-sheet."

The emperor gathered his courage from her words and ordered his trusted officers Belisarius and Mundus to attack the demonstrators. They made swift work of the demonstrators. His Thracian and Gothic troops assaulted the Hippodrome and killed over 30,000, including the challenger to the throne Hypatius, at Theodora's insistence. This

number equaled 10 percent of the city's population and was larger than the medieval populations of London, France, or Rome. They were victorious in their battle, but only because of the empress's courage and confidence in her husband's ability to overcome the rioters. Had she not done so, Justinian would have most likely been overthrown.

With the revolt put down, Theodora and Justinian kept the high taxes in place and used the revenue to build up Constantinople. Through their urban planning and architectural patronage, the city reached its full imperial splendor. It remained the envy of the medieval world for centuries. Western Europeans who traveled to the Byzantine capital were utterly shocked by its grandeur, as their home cities were little more than a castle and cathedral surrounded by thatched-roofed cottages. Historians later described Constantinople as the still-beating heart of antiquity in the middle ages. The most magnificent of these works was the Haghia Sophia church, completed in 537. The physicist Isidore of Milteus and mathematician Anthemius of Tralles were chief architects. Materials were brought from all over the world – Hellenistic columns from the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, large stones from Egypt, green marble from Thessaly, and yellow stone from Syria.

Over 10,000 workers were employed to construct the building, which had a massive dome. It was the largest church in the world and remained so for nearly a millennium. Justinian, upon walking into the church, was rumored to have exclaimed, “Oh Solomon, I have surpassed thee!” Spectators who entered it were no less awe-struck and proclaimed that it was the location where heaven and earth met.

Theodora commissioned many other works, namely aqueducts, bridges, and 25 churches, but she did not deprive herself of personal splendor. This was perhaps as a way to make up for her simple youth. She was heavily adorned with Byzantine jewelry. This style continued the Greco-Roman traditions but was influenced by Eastern style. It contained pearls, a variety of precious gems, and enamel. Her clothing consisted of richly colored fabrics, often of royal purple. She wore rich furs, ornate costume jewelry, and ankle-skimming dresses. She spent much of the year in palaces and gardens along the Bosphorus coast with her favorite female servants and eunuchs. She partook of the local hot springs and availed herself all forms of beauty treatment used by Roman noblewomen.

Theodora was not afraid to wield power, which she did with gusto whenever an official entered her antechamber. According to Gibbon,

they had to kiss her feet and carefully follow all rules of royal decorum. If not they were thrown in prison or exiled. Her strong control may have been exaggerated, but she and her husband clearly demonstrated their dominance over a bureaucracy that they suspected of corruption. For better and for worse, this power model of the emperor and empress created a complex system of court rituals, and this is the reason that today we describe something enigmatic and unnecessarily cumbersome as “Byzantine.”

But Theodora did not forget the difficulties she experienced as a youth, nor was she indifferent to the outcasts of Constantinople. She and her husband established a number of pious and charitable foundations. She is most well-known for establishing a benevolent institution for women that like her had been compelled to enter prostitution. Procopius writes that Theodora converted a palace on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus Strait to a spacious monastery that could house 500 women.

Those who took up holy orders were offered a rare means of escape from a profession that engulfed its practitioners in the ancient world, much as it does today. Some reports claimed a number of women were not so grateful to be placed in confinement, and they threw themselves into the sea to escape their restrictive new life. This last detail, however, was likely a fictional statement made up by the chronicler to demonstrate that Theodora was heavy handed and aggressive even in her charity.

The empress promoted laws that strengthened a woman's position in the event of divorce, giving an easier path to owning property and even bringing suits against men. The death penalty was brought against rape and she forbade abandonment of unwanted infants. Similar legal protection for women did not enter many European states until the Renaissance, and were absent in such places as Victorian England.

The empress also expressed an independent religious will from her husband, who was a Chalcedonian while she a Monophysite. She founded a monastery that provided refuge for renegade figures such as Severus and Anthimus. Legend has it that the latter hid in Theodora's quarters for 12 years following an excommunication. Both Theodora and Justinian even sent competing missionaries to southern Egypt in Thebaid to convert the inhabitants to their respective beliefs. The ruler of this region accepted Theodora's embassy as he feared the wrath of the empress more than the emperor.

Theodora came down with what many chroniclers believed to be cancer and died in June 548 at the age of 48. Justinian reportedly wept bitterly at her funeral. Theodora was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostle in Constantinople, one of the many churches which she and Justinian had been responsible for building during their reign. The influence on her husband remained long after her death. He lived nearly 20 more years but never remarried. Justinian also kept his promise to protect a small Monophysite community of refugees on the Marmara sea.

A posthumous event perfectly illustrates Theodora's rise to power from a lowly circus performer. Following her death, the city of Olbia in modern-day Libya renamed itself Theodorias in her honor. It was located in the same lands that decades before was the site in which a general with whom she was having an affair abandoned her. Residents of this coastal state likely had little memory of the powerful empress as a frightened mistress. If anyone did, they would have scarcely been able to guess the impact she would one day have on the medieval world.

Chapter 2:

Lady Aethelflaed of the Mercians (872-918): Midwife of England, Viking Slayer

The story of Aethelflaed is literally one of epic proportions. She led England's two southern kingdoms against the Danish Vikings, crushing their armies due to her bravery and tactical brilliance, and creating a united England. When J.R.R. Tolkien was a professor of Anglo Saxon studies at Oxford University, he likely used her life as an inspiration for Eowyn, Lady of Rohan, in “The Lord of the Rings.”

If so, Tolkien could not have paid a higher compliment to a historical figure. It was Eowyn who slew the Lord of the Nazgul, among the fiercest enemies in his series. Other similarities between the two women are numerous. Both faced down terrifying enemies at a time of doom. Both led battle charges on horseback into pitched battles. And both left behind a better society than the one they ruled.

Aethelflaed came to power at a highly unstable period for England. Roman legions had completely withdrawn from the island in 410. Saxons overran it, followed by Germanic migrants such as the Anglos and Jutes. In 793 the Northmen, or Vikings, arrived from Scandinavia and raided monasteries. In 866 a huge Danish force arrived by ship and put Anglo-Saxon kings to the sword, establishing their rule over large parts of the island.

Historians consider this time a Dark Age for England, partly because so few sources survive and knowledge about this period is something of a black hole. Literacy was practically non-existent and there were too few monasteries around to train the scribes that would copy and preserve manuscripts. This was due to society being unable to rebuild itself due to endless invasions. These foreign invaders were not great assistance when all the inhabitants wanted to do was cultivate their land, rebuild a school or two, and possibly eke out a new book once a decade.

It was a time of such persistent danger that only an epic work as morose as Beowulf properly captures its gloominess. But Aethelflaed, an Anglo-Saxon ruler, proved her resolve in the face of these invaders and soon became their bane.

Born in 870, Aethelflaed was the eldest child of King Alfred the Great of Wessex and Queen Ealhswith. Her younger siblings included two brothers, Edward the Elder and Aethelwaerd; and two sisters, Aelfthryth, Countess of Flanders, and Aethelgiva, Abbess of Shaftesbury. Her father was a widely respected commander who won a battle in Edington against the Vikings in 862, freeing western Mercia from their control.

Following this victory he worked to codify laws, reinforce the kingdom through fortifications, which were manned year round, with half his people on guard duty and the other half tending to the harvest. Along with governing, Alfred gave his daughter military instruction that was usually only reserved for men. He taught Aethelflaed the use of weapons, military strategy, and the forming of legal and economic policies. She learned at the king's side, watching him assemble a navy, collect taxes, promote trade, and protect the church.

Alfred set about to consolidate the unconquered parts of England, and to further these plans he used his young daughter. Aethelred, the leader of the midland realm of Mercia, submitted to King Alfred to combine their forces against the Vikings. Alfred cemented the alliance by giving Aethelflaed, 16 years old at the time, to him in marriage in 884. Alfred was quite serious about this marriage, because her dowry to Aethelred consisted of the entire city of London.

She proved to be a tough bride even before they exchanged nuptials. During a journey from Wessex to Mercia, Aethelflaed and her wedding party were attacked by Vikings. The assault was likely done to prevent an alliance between Wessex and Mercia. Whatever the reason, the Vikings suffered the fierce wrath of interfering with a bride while preparing for her wedding. Her military upbringing did not leave her unprepared during the surprise attack.

She fought alongside her bodyguards, protecting the maids and dowry. When the battle turned against them, Aethelflaed and her men retreated into a castle, which by then most of her attendants had been killed and her dowry looted. Despite being outnumbered, they eventually struck down every last one of their assailants. Only she, her maidservant, and a bodyguard survived. This episode perhaps ranks her as the most lethal Bridezilla in history.

Aethelred and Aethelflaed appear side-by-side in the sources for the next 25 years, traveling throughout England and strengthening their

war-torn lands. This demonstrates that even in her teen years she was an active ruler of the south and midland realms. In 888 Aethelflaed and her husband began to fortify towns and rebuild churches. A Mercian mint was built in Gloucester and began turning out coins by 899. They constructed a palace outside the city walls and inhabited it there. They also founded the church of St. Paul in Gloucester despite its exposure to Viking raids.

As she ruled with her husband, Aethelflaed positioned her siblings and children for political power in order to continue the family dynasty and complete her father's vision of a unified kingdom. Their only daughter was Aelfwynn, born in 888. Like her mother she was taught military strategy from a young age, reportedly executing the arts of war as well as any man.

Some scholars argued that Aethelflaed purposely kept her daughter from marriage so that there would be no heir to the Mercian throne and the crown would go automatically to Aethelflaed's brother, Edward. Yet, he may have recognized that his sister was the stronger ruler between the two of them. In 895 he sent his son Athelstan to her court for education. He was the heir apparent and therefore required to be trained in politics, diplomacy, and warfare.

After her father's death in 899 and her husband coming down with a debilitating disease in 902, Aethelflaed became ruler of Mercia in all but name. As Edward spread rule to Wessex and East Anglia, she consolidated power in her domain. She was responsible for repulsing Norse settlers from Chester in 905, one of the most famous battles during this period due to the city's strategic and commercial significance as a port.

When Aethelflaed heard of the Norse uprising and plans for attack, she rushed to Chester and stationed her soldiers outside the city walls. Her plan was for the soldiers to fight briefly with the Vikings, and then feign retreat into the gates, which were conveniently left open for the invaders. When the Vikings entered, the gates swung shut and locked behind them. They immediately knew that they had ridden into a trap. The army hiding inside pounced. With sword in hand, Aethelflaed and her soldiers, along with the townspeople, slaughtered them.

As she consolidated her rule, she worked with Edward to unite England's kingdoms. They knew through their decades of battling foreign invaders that a fragmented island could not continually

repulse the Vikings. She assisted with a raid of East Anglia and rebuilt Gloucester, ruling in her husband's stead. Although his name was used in official transactions and much correspondence, it was Aethelflaed who made the final administrative decisions concerning kingdom. It was also she who entered an alliance with the Scots and the Welsh and supported the Danes against the Norwegians.

Her husband had been ill for a decade and eventually died in 911. She became the sole ruler and the scribes conferred the title upon her “The Lady of the Mercians.” It was no ordinary matter for her to claim rulership, as she was the first Anglo-Saxon queen in history to rule without the fig leaf of regency or a king by her side. It was an exceptional honor granted to her by the aristocrats, who knew that she had essentially ran the realm for 10 years and possessed unique abilities to govern due to her unusual upbringing.

Furthermore, Mercia's nobles preferred a domestic queen to a foreign king from Wessex. Making good on the trust conferred to her, she quickly set out to consolidate power. Aethelflaed built nine forts in the next decade to keep out the Danes and Welsh and protect goods against raiding armies. They included one in Bridgnorth (912), Stafford and Tamworth (913), Eddisbury and Warwick (914), and Chirbury and Runcorn (915).

During her rule she led armies in three important battles and won them all. In 915 she repelled a Viking force that landed in Bristol Channel and attacked Wales. In 916 she invaded Wales and Powys in response to the murder of an English abbot. In 917 she recaptured Derby from the Danes.

As her brother conquered the Midlands, Essex, and East Anglia from the Danes, the armies of Leicester and York surrendered to her rather than face the Anglo-Saxon on the battlefield. Part of the reason for their surrender may have been due to the Danes fearing an invasion of the Norse from Ireland and preferring submission to a woman's rule over a slaughter from the East. Surely, though, her martial ferocity played a significant factor.

Aethelflaed's influence extended beyond Mercia's borders. Edward consulted her for tactical advice on many occasions because he thought of her as the better battle commander. She also helped built up England's transportation infrastructure. Many of the roads had fallen derelict in recent centuries following the retreat of the Roman Empire. Aethelflaed reclaimed some of its transportation system. She

oversaw the rebuilding of Gloucester's Roman roads, which can still be seen today and can be traversed in the city center. Other surviving structures from her reign include the Gloucester Priory and the Gloucester Cathedral.

In 918 Aethelflaed died from unknown causes. It may have been that she was injured in battle and died from a subsequent infection. Perhaps she fell to the plague, malaria, or any number of indeterminate diseases. Whatever the cause, it was exceptionally poor timing. She was on the verge of negotiating a treaty with York in which the latter would pledge its allegiance to her. If successful, it would have united England for the first time since the seventh century.

The events that followed her death were a testimony to Aethelflaed's remarkable life. She was succeeded on the throne by her daughter Aelfwynn, who had been serving as co-ruler with her mother for years. It was the first instance of female-to-female royal succession in Europe and was not repeated for six hundred years, when Lady Jane Grey was followed by Mary in 1553 and then Elizabeth I in 1558. This female succession was not a decision that the Mercian aristocracy favored, but much like the dilemma of 911, they preferred this option over installing in a foreign ruler.

Her reign, unfortunately, did not last long. Edward marched into Mercia six months later and took command of his sister's domains, perhaps out of fear that these lands were drifting away from Wessex. Unification of England was now within reach. The Lady of Mercia's life work was completed by her nephew Aethelstan, who was raised at her court, and finally succeeded in uniting the kingdoms in 927. He ruled a united England until his death in 939.

Aethelflaed was the most dominant female monarch in England until Queen Elizabeth's reign six centuries later (and Elizabeth never got her hands dirty in direct combat like her predecessor). She is remembered for her intelligence, leadership, courage, and kindness, most notably by her adversaries. Even in the Middle Ages, her deeds were lionized by poets and chroniclers. Since they did not have a good way to compliment a powerful female soldier in those days, they did their best and praised her as being brave and almost masculine.

According to Alex Burghart, the 12th-century historian William of Malmsebury called her “a most powerful man-like woman.” This praise unfortunately evokes the image of a transvestite on horseback,

but it was a comment on her bravery rather than any androgynous physical attributes. He was not alone in his high opinion of her. Henry of Huntingdon went one step further with his panegyric to the Anglo-Saxon queen:

“Some have thought and said that if she had not been suddenly snatched away by death, she would have surpassed the most valiant of men.”

Chapter 3:

Anna Komnene (1083-1153): Scholar, Historian, Royal Victim of an Electra Complex

The would-be Byzantine empress Anna was nothing if not an effective self-promoter. Fortunately for her, she had an excellent platform to discuss her many talents. In the pages of her magisterial history of medieval Byzantium, *The Alexiad*, Anna says the following about herself: “I, Anna, the daughter of two royal personages, Alexios and Irene, born and bred in the purple. I was not ignorant of letters, for I carried my study of Greek to the highest pitch, and was also not unpracticed in rhetoric; I perused the works of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato carefully, and enriched my mind by the 'quaternion' of learning. (I must let this out and it is not bragging to state what nature and my zeal for learning have given me and the gifts which God apportioned to me at birth and time has contributed).”

She may not have been gifted with understatement, but by any standard Anna measured up to her self-evaluation. She wrote one of the most important works of history in the Middle Ages, giving scholars a priceless work on Byzantine politics, the Crusades, and royal life. She was also ambitious stateswoman that attempted to become empress, perhaps after reading about the exploits of Theodora and the tremendous power that she wielded.

Anna conspired to assassinate her brother so that her husband Bryennios could be placed on the throne. This attempt failed and her brother exiled her to a convent in the 1140s. This was an unfortunate turn of events for Anna, but fortunate for us as she used her time to compose The Alexiad, a fifteen-volume work on the life and times of her father and the First Crusade.

Anna Komnene was born December 1083 to Emperor Alexios Komnenos and Empress Irene Doukaina in the purple chamber of the imperial palace. It was a tumultuous time for the empire. Twelve years earlier the Seljuk Turks handed the Byzantines a disastrous defeat in Manzikert, and the empire lost nearly all its land holdings in Anatolia, the breadbasket of Byzantium.

In her childhood, Europe launched the First Crusade, and hundreds of

thousands of Catholic pilgrims passed through – and ransacked – the surroundings of Constantinople. This episode earned her the contempt of the Western knights, and these sentiments found their way into the Alexiad decades later. She was the eldest of the nine children and part of quite a pedigree.

Her siblings included Maria Komnene, John II Komnenos (future emperor), Andronikos Komnenos, Isaac Komnenos, Eudokia Komnene, Theodora Komnene, Manuel Komnenos and Zoe Komnene. Anna maintained close ties to her family, including the siblings all born after her, except for those with whom she held a fierce rivalry.

Anna was raised by Maria of Alania, her future mother-in-law. For much of her childhood she received a classical education consisting of literature, ancient Greek, rhetoric, science, geography, mathematics, medicine, and military affairs. She was a gifted pupil and able to carry scholarly discourses with other academics. Female access to this level of education was more easily obtainable in Byzantium than in Western Europe but was still a luxury and rarity. The only subject left out of her curriculum was ancient Greek poetry, which due to its graphic, sexual, and polytheistic nature was considered unsuitable by her parents. She apparently worked around this ban later in life. Scholars note that the Alexiad was written in conscious imitation of classical Attic Greek and much different from the colloquial Greek of Constantinople.

Her contemporary Georgios Tornikes said that she read ancient poetry, such as the Odyssey, in secret. Anna “braced the weakness of her soul” and studied the poetry “taking care not to be detected by her parents” – the ancient equivalent of keeping a stash of sultry material hidden under her bed

The Byzantine dynasty into which she was born had always been unstable and made for a difficult childhood. It was based on a complex set of marriage alliances arranged between an emperor's child and another noble or state official. Anna was placed into this imperial chess match from birth. Betrothed while only an infant, she was arranged to marry Constantine Doukas, the son of the ex-Emperor Michael VII and Maria of Alania.

His father had been forced to abdicate his throne in 1078. Upon Constantine's betrothal to Anna, he was named co-emperor of the empire, and she was placed on a trajectory to become the empress at birth due to her parents not having a son. These plans were soon

derailed. Her mother Irene gave birth to John II in 1087, 4 years after Anna's birth, and he was promoted to first in the line of royal succession. By then the point had become moot, as Anna's husband-to-be, the young Doukas died after 1094.

A new marriage was arranged for Anna, and she was wed at 14 to Nikephoros Bryennios the Younger, the son of an aristocrat. It was a political marriage from the start, but a stable one. They remained together for 40 years and had four children together: Alexios, John, Irene and Maria. Anna consistently praised her husband in the Alexiad. She says of her husband that he was “a man who far outshone his contemporaries by his surpassing beauty, his superior intelligence, and his accurate speech. To look at him, or to listen to him, was a pure delight. […] My husband, as I said, was most remarkable in every way; he accompanied my brother John, the Emperor, on several other expeditions against the barbarians and held the city of Antioch.” However, these fond sentiments may have been masking bitterness because her pathway to becoming empress had been blocked off.

In addition to her scholastic abilities, Anna was also a gifted administrator and educator. She organized and ran a large hospital and orphanage that was endowed by Alexios, and she cared for over 10,000 children. Here she taught medicine to the staff and remedial subjects to the orphans. However, the young princess’s ambition for imperial power was not satiated by philanthropy. Anna began to consider alternative methods to ruling the empire than waiting out her turn in the line of succession.

Anna's greatest disappointment was failing to seize the opportunity to rule as empress. As the oldest child of Alexios, she had been told in early childhood that she and Constantine would control Byzantium. She was also the center of her father's affections, as she stood next in line for the throne. Her world was shattered when John II's birth caused Alexios's attention to pass from her to him. Anna openly voiced her opposition to her younger brother taking the purple and made every attempt to halt his coronation. She tried to convince her mother and father to disinherit John and give her the crown, but Alexios refused. Anna did not relent in her attempts to obtain power even after his death in 1118.

Her mother Irene realized her daughter's talents from an early age and assisted her in attempting to seize the throne. Irene moved to replace her brother John Komnenos with her husband Bryennios and Anna in

the succession. Although Alexios fell sick in 1112 with rheumatism and turned the civil government over to Irene, she still could not successfully arrange the power transfer.

According to the chronicler Niketas Choniates in his *Narrative*, when Alexios was on his deathbed in his bedchamber, John II arrived and secretly took his father's imperial ring. He knew of Anna's plot and thwarted her final attempt for rule. In a last-ditch effort she schemed to have John assassinated at their father's funeral. Her sympathizers realized that such a plan was too risky, and the plot came to nothing.

Anna blamed her husband for the failed coup, claiming she was the one who wore the iron-mail pants in the relationship. According to one account, she taunted him with the insult that “nature had mistaken the two sexes and had endowed Bryennius with the soul of a woman.” Bryennios ignored this insult and still refused to force John to abdicate the throne or support the assassination attempts against him. Chroniclers who disliked Anna claimed that in all these plots she demonstrated her overbearing, domineering behavior.

A memorable account by Choniates – who did not write of these events until Constantinople’s conquest in 1204 by the Latin crusaders and was likely looking for somebody to blame – has an interesting anecdote concerning her character flaws. He claimed that Anna, faced with a weak husband who did not seize the opportunity for the throne when he had the chance, wanted revenge and made him suffer in the royal bedchamber: “When having conjugal relations, Anna Komnene tensed her muscles when Nikephoros Bryennios inserted his penis, causing him great pain.” This story is likely a fiction concocted by her enemies. But if any parts of it are true, Sigmund Freud could fill a book psychoanalyzing Anna's attitudes toward her husband, father and other male relatives in her life.

After her plot against John was discovered, she was forced to forfeit her own property, title, and royal status. John exiled her to Kecharitomene, a convent that Irene had founded. She was later joined by her sister Eudokia. Bryennios kept his royal duties at the imperial palace and acted as an advisor to John II until his death.

It was at this time that Anna set to work on writing the Alexiad. She spent years laboring over its historical details, consulting as many records as were available. She completed the twelve-volume magnum opus in 1148. It details the political and military history of the Byzantine Empire during Alexios's reign and the empire's interaction

with the First Crusade. As she described these events Anna sprinkled her own views throughout the narrative.

Anna adored her father despite him rejecting her for the throne, and her support of him drips off the page, even though she repeatedly claims throughout the Alexiad that she tried to remain impartial. Her admiration of him is so strong that critics of the work, such as Charles Diehl, argue that she was an infatuated eldest daughter and almost the archetype of a 'Daddy's princess.'

Anna nevertheless states that her work was objective. The exiled royal claimed that she wished she were not the emperor's daughter so that the reader would not suspect her of bias. She was most definitely not impartial, but that she even made an attempt stands in contrast to the Latin Chroniclers of the European crusaders who made no apology about singing of the heroic, and oftentimes exaggerated, deeds of their lords that they followed on the road to Jerusalem.

Anna did largely succeed in writing as an even-handed historian. She was not afraid to show her displeasure of her father's troops and their atrocities committed during the entry to Constantinople in 1081. Nor was she afraid to depict him as a sometimes-unpopular statesman who contended with various coup attempts.

The Alexiad is the only Hellenic account of the First Crusades. Without this work, it is unlikely a comprehensive account of the First Crusade through Greek or female eyes would have been available to scholars. Her primary antagonist is the Norman crusader Bohemund and his betrayal of Alexios at Antioch, in which he failed to hand off the conquered city to the Byzantine Emperor. This particular account was written in the 1140s, when the Byzantines warred against the Normans, and may have been a commentary on current events rather than recent history.

The Alexiad is a remarkable work in its own right – and a highly entertaining read even today – regardless of the author's background. Yet its uniqueness is compounded by the lack of educational opportunities available to women and the resistance they would have encountered if trying to engage in such rigorous scholarly work. Over the centuries it has been praised by researchers throughout Europe. The *Journal des Savans* praised Anna in 1675 with a backhanded compliment by saying the work was almost *too good* to be written by a woman.

“The elegance with which Anna Comnena has, in fifteen books, described the life and actions of her father, and the strong and eloquent manner in which she has set them off, are so much above the ordinary capacity of women, as almost to excite a doubt whether she were indeed the author of the work. It is impossible to read the descriptions she has given of countries, rivers, mountains, towns, sieges, battles, the reflections she makes upon particular events, the judgement she passes upon human actions, with her digressions on various occasions, without perceiving that she must have been well skilled in grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and mathematics: nay, even that she must have possessed some knowledge of law, physics, and divinity – studies very rare and uncommon in her sex.”

Anna Komnene died after completing the Alexiad in 1148 in Kecharitomene. Little is known of her later life, nor is much known of her children, other than her eldest son Alexios Komnenos, the commander of the Byzantine navy. Yet despite failing in her political objectives in life, Anna appears to have gotten the last laugh. Her influence in what scholars know about that time in history towers over any other account. She made herself the protagonist in a story in which villains attempt to cut down the heroes of the empire and install figures of lesser character on the throne. And she turned her plight into the tale of a martyr who suffered for her moral character. It is a story that is still told today on her terms.

It would be a mistake for this writer to issue a retrospective about the life of Anna Komnene when her skilled pen is still at our disposal. Let us hear how the Byzantine would-be empress took account of her last years from her father's death until her exile. She certainly did not lack for dramatic flair in discussing the woes of her life. It would be tempting to write this account off as the Byzantine equivalent of a woe-is-me Facebook post. But due to Anna's powerful abilities of narration, her sufferings appear as no less than that of a Greek tragedy.

“We hear from some the wonderful story of Niobe changed into stone by grief then even after the change which transformed her into an insensitive substance as her sufferings were immortal even in that insensitive substance. But I in truth am more unfortunate than she was, because after these very great and supreme misfortunes I am still alive and shall still feel others. It would have been better to be turned to senseless stone and to have remained with tears flowing without any feeling for sufferings than to endure such ills; and that intolerable troubles in the palace should be stirred up against me by men is more

wretched than even Niobe's sufferings the evils having proceeded so far ceased."

"After the death of the imperial pair the loss of the Caesar and my consequent grief would have been sufficient for the contrition of my soul and body; but now like rivers flowing down from high mountains the rivers of ills into one torrent which is inundating my house. But now my history must be concluded, for if I were to describe sad events any longer I might become bitter."

Chapter 4:

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204): The Richest Queen in Europe, the Second Crusade's Unofficial Fashionista

As a queen who ruled over France and then England, Eleanor of Aquitaine was a major power player in the Middle Ages. She served as regent during both of her husbands' absences in foreign wars and diplomatic missions. She was a vigorous patron of the arts and came to define medieval court culture as it is imagined today.

Her throne room had a troubadour in one corner and a poet in the other. Eleanor had a significant impact on the Second Crusade as well. Through her financial backing and artistic styling, she added panache to what could have been a drab military affair. Her flair for the dramatic also earned her enemies, who considered her to be acting frivolously during a religious war. Her actions during the Second Crusade caused the pope to release a papal edict in which he expressly forbade women to join the next crusade. As a result, historians have given a somewhat unfair account of her fascinating life.

Eleanor was born between 1122 and 1124. Her father was William X, the Duke of Aquitaine, and her mother Aenor de Chatellerault. She was given a broad education and became literate, an uncommon achievement for females at the time. She grew up in the extravagant court of Poitiers, where she was rarely disciplined and always admired. Extroverted, intelligent, beautiful, and strong-willed, Eleanor became the Duchess of Aquitaine as she was entering her teens, giving her control of the largest duchy in France.

As a result she was viewed as the most eligible heiress in Europe and had suitors lined up to claim her hand in marriage. Eleanor's suitors likely did not complain about her appearance, either. Contemporary sources praised her beauty. The troubadour Bernard de Ventadour called her “gracious, lovely, the embodiment of charm,” with “lovely eyes and noble countenance.”

Eleanor’s father was concerned that she would be kidnapped after his death and held for ransom. For this reason he named King Louis VI of France her guardian in his will, giving her the protection she needed until her marriage. The French monarch was overjoyed to be Eleanor’s

guardian, and all the estates it entailed. He licked his chops at acquiring her land with the same enthusiasm as a commercial real estate developer preparing to bulldoze virgin forest to build a Foot Locker and TJ Maxx.

The king began to make plans for her to marry his son and heir, Prince Louis. His designs for imperial power were so lacking of pretense that within hours of being informed of the death of Eleanor's father, he arranged for her marriage to his 16-year-old son – a clear example of how medieval dynastic succession laws often stripped royal marriage of romance and made them purely a legal matter. The couple was married on July 25, 1137 in the Cathedral of Saint Andre.

Shortly after the wedding, King Louis VI died and his son became King Louis VII. The teenager, described as quiet and timid, was not ready to govern his kingdom. He handed many of his responsibilities over to his father's advisors. Eleanor, however, had no such reservations about exercising her power as queen despite being a politically inexperienced teenager. She attended council meetings and frequently clashed with Louis's advisors. They would have likely ignored her completely, but a stipulation in Louis and Eleanor's marriage contract stated that she retained control of Aquitaine and therefore still retained significant power.

The two young royals and their factions soon came to loggerheads. As a result, their marriage was not a happy one, as would be expected if two teenagers were wed and both given far more power than their maturity could handle.

Compounded with difficulties stemming from political differences, Eleanor was bored with Paris. At the time it had a population of little more than 10,000 and was a rustic backwater version of its modern-day equivalent. This was true of nearly all cities in Europe, except for a few exceptions on the Italian peninsula. Eleanor did her best to invigorate her court by introducing a number of customs from Aquitaine such as decorative tapestries, large fireplaces, and better sunlit architecture for the castle's interior.

Eleanor disliked what she viewed as her husband's excessive piety. He wore the drab cosset that made others assume he had taken holy orders. She preferred extravagant gowns and dresses to suit each particular occasion. Eleanor once complained that she thought she was marrying a man, but it turned out she had wed a monk. She was exasperated by her timid, sweet-tempered husband, particularly since

he expected a subordinate queen as dull as him.

A chance for the royal couple to sort out their differences away from home presented itself in the form of the Second Crusade. This military mission was the sequel to the First Crusade, in which European knights and foot soldiers successfully conquered Jerusalem in 1099 and set up in nearby territories the County of Edessa, the Principality of Antioch, and the County of Tripoli. The success was short-lived. In response, Seljuk and Fatimid forces regrouped and began to attack Christian outposts in the Holy Land. They first took Edessa in 1144. Pope Eugenius III issued a call for the Second Crusade to push the Muslim forces back and prevent other crusader states from falling.

When King Louis decided to take up the cross and travel to the Holy Land, Eleanor was determined to go with him. At the age of 19 she knelt down and gave an oath to take up the crusade following a sermon given by Bernard of Clairvaux. She pledged thousands of her vassals for the expedition. There is some indication that she had been in communication with her uncle Raymond before swearing to join the Crusade, which may have had some influence over her decision. Raymond was the king in Antioch, and was in frequent contact with the French court, seeking French protection for his country.

In preparing for the Crusade, Eleanor made plans to be accompanied by 1,000 knights and 300 ladies, the latter whom intended to go and tend to the wounded. The presence of her ladies and wagons of female servants, along with their purely decorative lances and armor, elicited scorn of other crusaders.

They considered such conspicuous consumption inappropriate on a holy crusade, particularly on such a difficult journey where even food and water were scarce. It was akin to a platinum-selling hip hop star joining a military convoy in Afghanistan, complete with his enormous entourage that filled up 10 Hummers.

At best it was a distraction; at worst it was a safety threat. One chronicler claims that she took a group of minstrels and troubadours with her, who were out of place on the expedition; she led them while wearing boots embroidered in gold. This earned her the moniker *La dame aux jambes d'or*, or, “The lady with the golden feet,” likely said with tongue firmly planted in cheek.

According to one legend, Eleanor and her ladies dressed as Amazons during the Second Crusade. It was a testimony to the queen's love of

Greek legends about the warrior women's conquests. Most historians, however, have discounted this story as the exaggerations of an exasperated writer annoyed with the queen's excess.

However, this apocryphal legend of her interest in extravagant fashion does have an element of truth. She introduced new forms of dress from the Middle East to France and England following her return to Europe, making a contribution to the increasing interactions between the two cultures after the Crusades.

Eleanor and the crusading forces took the overland route to Jerusalem and made their way to Constantinople. The French crusaders were amazed at the riches they saw in the Byzantine capital, and Eleanor was enamored with the art and culture on display. However, once they exited the imperial city and crossed over the Bosphorus Strait into Seljuk Turkish-held territory, she saw that the Crusades of gallant deeds that existed in song and poetry gave way to the grim reality of a dangerous military expedition through hostile conditions.

Upon leaving Constantinople, the crusaders made their way through enemy territory where they were attacked by a Turkish army. These attacks, in combination with bad weather, almost destroyed the crusaders. Those who had survived the attacks finally made it to Attalia, where Louis attempted to hire ships to carry them the rest of the way to the Holy Land.

There were not enough vessels available for their force, so Louis abandoned most of the army so that he and the rest of the nobles could travel by sea to Outremer. Those not so fortunate, mostly poor foot soldiers and those of non-noble birth, were left to make the rest of the journey overland. They were either killed or captured by Turkish soldiers.

Eleanor, King Louis VII, and the rest of the nobles arrived at Antioch and were welcomed by her uncle Raymond, the ruler of the city. She was delighted to finally arrive in Antioch and see him again. The two were roughly the same age and had been childhood companions. Raymond and Eleanor began to spend significant time in each other's company, as he was far more interesting and handsome than Louis VII.

This led to a swirl of rumors among the knights that the two were having an affair. There is some debate over whether or not this was true, as most of the evidence for it is interpreted in light of the fact

that Eleanor and Louis divorced in 1152. Yet, it is inarguable that marital tensions rose between the two while in Antioch. Raymond argued that attempting to recapture Edessa was the best strategic objective of the Crusade, and Eleanor agreed. However, Louis believed that reaching Jerusalem was the most important goal and demanded that his wife accompany him.

Louis decided to march his army out of Antioch and to make his way to Jerusalem. Eleanor was furious at Louis's refusal to help Raymond and stated that she would not be accompanying him to Jerusalem. She intended that she and her troops from Aquitaine stay in Antioch and help Raymond attack Nur ad-Din, the Turkic atabeg of Allepo and Mosul. She also threatened Louis with divorce. Once they returned to Europe she not only would separate from him, but also would take back all of her lands that came with their marriage.

Eleanor claimed that their marriage had never been valid in the eyes of God. According to consanguinity laws, their marriage was invalid as they were distant cousins and their union was prohibited by the church (never mind her relations with her uncle). Louis responded by doing what any possessive husband would do by concocting a hair-brained scheme to restore his crumbling marriage. He kidnapped Eleanor in the middle of the night and set sail for Acre, keeping her close by for the rest of their time in the Holy Land.

Louis and Eleanor remained within Outremer until Easter 1149. The two had irreconcilable differences and returned to Europe in separate ships. Eleanor reached Palermo, Sicily, where she received shelter and waited for word of Louis. He made land in Calabria. It was at this time that Eleanor learned of the gruesome death of her uncle Raymond. He was killed in a battle against Nur ad-Din in which he was captured and beheaded, with his head delivered to the Caliph of Baghdad.

His death cemented Eleanor's frustration with her husband. The estranged couple travelled to see Pope Eugenius III to sort out their royal conflict. Eleanor hoped that the pope would grant an annulment of her marriage, but Eugenius attempted to reconcile the couple. The pope did his best as a couple's therapist. He was not a subtle one, though, and commanded that the two sleep in the same bed.

Shortly after this, Eleanor became pregnant, although there was some speculation that she had become great with child in Antioch, possibly by Raymond. For the most part, this question of paternity was not pursued, although both Louis and Eleanor were disappointed that

their second child was once again a girl.

The couple made their way back to France, but was unable to save their marriage. On March 11, 1152, the marriage was dissolved on the grounds of consanguinity. This principle was a useful medieval escape clause for marriage, since most European nobles at this time had some degree of relation.

With her annulment she regained possession of Aquitaine and Poitou, making suitors once again line up outside her door. Eleanor spent little time mourning her marriage to Louis. She went on to marry Henry of Anjou in 1152 before the annulment was even finalized. Eleanor was 30 at the time and he 18, making her something of a medieval cougar. Though he wasn't handsome in the traditional sense, Henry was the opposite of Eleanor's old husband. He was stocky and powerful. He was an avid hunter, intellectual, and loved a scholarly debate.

Unfortunately, he also had a fierce temper, which came into full bloom in later decades when he and Eleanor ran into fierce conflict. In 1154 he became Henry II of England after securing support from the English lords. She became the queen of England and provided a royal line to her new husband, having eight children in 15 years. Five of these children were sons, most notably Richard the Lionheart, arguably the most famous crusader in history and Eleanor's favorite son.

In his early years as king, Henry governed England on horseback like Eleanor's father William X. so Eleanor administered his lands in France during his long absences. She also supported him during feuds between the nobles and clergy. However, after the birth of her last son, John in 1167, and rumors of Henry's affair with Rosemond Clifford surfaced, their marriage began to decline. In 1168 she left for Potiou, her famed court, and remained there for five years.

Eleanor reformed the court and filled it with her characteristic bon vivant lifestyle. She raised it to a level not seen before or since in the high Middle Ages. It was filled it with troubadours that sung tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, evoking images of chivalry and courtly love. It became famous for tournaments and culture. It was filled famed poets, such as Chretien de Troyes, known for his Arthurian literature.

Legend held that Eleanor, her daughter Marie, and other noble women

sat and listened to quarrels of lovers and acted as a jury to the questions surrounding issues of romantic love. The most famous question was whether or not true love existed in marriage, an issue that Eleanor most likely would have replied in the negative. It was at this court that the concept developed of a woman as an object of chivalry, who was to be a silent, passive goddess that one approached with reverence. It was a myth that developed into the modern-day conception of what a medieval woman was like, which sadly all too many people believe to be true today.

While there, Eleanor started to plot against Henry to ensure that the lords of her lands in Aquitaine and Poitou remained loyal to her and not her husband. Royal marriage did not mean that all possessions dissolved into common ownership as they do today, nor was there an assumption that they were automatically owned by the king. Instead, it was a perpetual power struggle between the two sides. Eleanor clearly knew how to play this game. When Henry became enormously unpopular in England for allowing his magnates to hack Thomas Becket to death, she and her eldest son plotted a revolt against him to get back Aquitaine.

The plot failed and Eleanor sought refuge with her uncle by escaping to Paris dressed as a nobleman. Henry's men intercepted her and imprisoned her in Touraine. Over the next 15 years she remained his prisoner in Winchester until his death in 1189. Having survived another unfortunate marriage, Eleanor prepared for the next stage of her life as a powerful monarch. She watched her son Richard, later known as the Lionheart, be crowned king in Westminster Abbey when she was 67.

Richard was less interested in ruling than he was crusading and quickly set sail for the Holy Land, leaving Eleanor in charge as his regent. She had to contend with her son John, who campaigned to seize his brother's title as their father's true heir (a drama that transformed into the backdrop of the Robin Hood legend) and French King Phillip II, who laid siege to Richard's European possessions.

The two allied against the elderly queen, whom they expected to be toppled easily. She was more than a match for their forces. Eleanor united barons and commoners against them, defending against their attacks in Flanders. When Richard was captured and held ransom, she drained the church coffers and raised taxes to obtain the amount of 100,000 marks for his release.

Richard died in 1199 in his mother's arms after being shot by a crossbow bolt during an assault on a garrison in Chalis. She feared the aftermath of her son's death, knowing a succession battle would immediately break out. Against her better judgement, she designated John as successor, but kept control over Aquitaine and Poitou to keep him in check. Despite being in her 7os, she travelled extensive through Normandy to ensure loyalty to John by issuing charters that released the subjects of feudal obligations.

The 80-year-old kept up a frenetic pace, arranging royal marriages to secure power, and even overseeing Mirebeau's defense in the face of a siege by her nemesis and great-nephew John. Though he acquired bits and pieces of Normandy throughout his rule, by 1204, all of it was lost. The same year Eleanor retreated to the nunnery of Fontevrault where she died.

Eleanor lived until 82, an extraordinary long life span in the Middle Ages. Her political ambition and independent spirit brought her into the same conflict in the court of England as it had in France. She had troubles in her marriage to Henry because of rumors of numerous affairs and also because of her later support of her sons' attempts to overthrow him by providing them with troops and money. However, despite the conflicts she managed to reform his court.

History has not looked up Eleanor as kindly as she deserves. Most contemporary accounts were written by chroniclers of the Crusades who found her behavior to be outlandish. But in her later life she demonstrated political brilliance by keeping England intact when her son Richard spent years in foreign lands and guarding the interests of her son John on the European continent.

Her offspring became kings, queens, archbishops, and emperors. And while her contributions to the Second Crusade were questionable from a military standpoint, her influence on today's concept of medieval manners, court life, and the grandest aspects of medieval life as we know it are beyond question.

Chapter 5:

Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380): The Semi-Literate Mystic Who Counseled Popes and Tamed Italian Politics

Catherine had an atypical upbringing for a theologian, mystic, and Italian diplomat. She was the 23th child of a poor family and unable to write until three years before her death at 33. She spent years as a low-ranking member of a religious order and primarily spent her days in solitude and prayer. One of her few responsibilities was to tend to the sick as the Black Death ravaged Europe. However, by the end of her life Catherine had travelled throughout the Italian peninsula as a diplomat and negotiated peace between princes.

She wrote dozens of letters to Pope Gregory and convinced him to restore the papacy in Rome. She authored “The Dialogue,” a treatise on a fictional conversation between a saint and God, which influenced theologians and the lay religious for centuries. She was named a joint Patron Saint of Italy along with Francis of Assisi in 1939 and a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970. While stories about her life are filled with miracles and very much hagiographic, they depicted a woman who managed to wield enormous power in the most unlikely of ways.

Catherine was born in 1347 to Jacopo Benincasa, a wool dyer, and Japa Benincasa, the daughter of a poet. She had a joyful disposition from her early years, and her family gave her the nickname Euphrosyne: Greek for “joy” and the name of an early Christian saint. At the age of six she claimed to her confessor to have seen her first vision of Christ.

He was adorned as a pope, seated on a throne, and surrounded by Peter, Paul, and John, all of whom appeared in the sky over the church of San Domenico. Catherine's brother Stephen saw her stand with an entranced look on her face. He had to seize her by the hand to wake her from the dream-like state. Catherine burst into tears afterwards and made a vow the following year to devote herself to God, forsaking marriage.

Catherine's desire to serve the church brought her into sharp conflict with her family. When she was 12 her mother urged her to mind her

appearance in order to enter a marriage arrangement. At age 16 her parents pressured her to marry the widower of her sister Bonaventura, who had died in childbirth. Catherine refused to do so and fasted until her parents capitulated. She cut off her long, brown hair in defiance of her mother's wishes.

To punish her, Japa tasked Catherine with managing the household. With her vast number of brothers and sisters, this was certainly backbreaking labor; their household would have made the homes of Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar or the Octomom appear calm by comparison. This responsibility always kept her in the presence of others, perhaps the worst of all punishments for the solitude-craving girl. This episode was critical in the development of her theology, as it helped her build in her soul “a private cell where no tribulation could enter.”

Catherine dedicated herself to the church that year. She joined the Dominican Tertiaries, an organization of the faithful who live their lives according to a religious order but do not take religious vows. The members of the order protested her application and questioned her motivation, since a typical tertiary was widowed or elderly. They finally accepted Catherine, likely as a result of her mother’s pleading, who feared her daughter starving herself to death through fasting if denied service to the church. She became an anchoress, a person who had retired from the world in prayer, and spent her days supplicating to God in a small room in her father's house.

Paradoxically, this station in life gave Catherine opportunities for social advancement. The position of an anchoress gave a woman considerable influence in a medieval community, even if most of her days were spent alone and she rarely ventured outside except to celebrate Mass. If a cobbler or local magistrate had theological questions or simply needed practical advice, he would often seek out an anchoress. She was considered to have unique communication with God and able to offer divine insight. Since she was in contact with various members of the community, an anchoress could also be a good source of news, a person's whereabouts, and especially gossip. Her advice was even sought out by local politicians.

Catherine's early years in which she acted as the town's unofficial psychologist and consultant proved essential in the coming decades when she moved up from the local level to the regional and international. She also took advantage of all that the Catholic Church had to offer to women in the 14th century. Through the Dominican

order she learned to read. It is likely here that she acquired Greek and Latin despite having no formal education. And she engaged in high-level theological discourse with her confessor, an informal type of religious training that likely equipped her to write “The Dialogue” years later.

Catherine only left her tiny cell to attend Mass and spoke to no one beside the confessor. Here she engaged in acts of self-mortification common in the medieval holy orders, such as scourging herself with an iron chain three times a day and slept on a board as a means to embrace poverty. She claims in this period to have had celestial visitations and familiar conversations with Christ.

In 1368 the 21-year-old underwent an earth-shattering experience that caused her to abandon her life of contemplative solitude and enter public life. According to “The Dialogue” she experienced what she describes in her letters as “Mystical Marriage with Jesus.” The Catholic Encyclopedia describes the event as a deep spiritual union between the devout and Christ, in which the former is deemed worthy to participate in the latter's sufferings so that others may be blessed.

It is “the accompaniment and symbol of a purely spiritual grace," and “that as a wife should share in the life of her husband, and as Christ suffered for the redemption of mankind, the mystical spouse enters into a more intimate participation in His sufferings.” In the vision, Christ gave Catherine a gold ring with four precious stones and a diamond in the middle to symbolize their spiritual union. It always remained visible to her, but invisible to others.

She was now prepared to offer herself sacrificially to the world. Catherine rejoined her family and used the household as a base to tend to the sick and poor in Siena, an enormous labor at the height of the Black Death. Such labors involved burying plague victims, a lowly and dangerous task that she often did herself, much as Francis of Assisi had done for lepers. "Never did she appear more admirable than at this time," wrote a priest who had known her from girlhood. "She was always with the plague-stricken; she prepared them for death and buried them with her own hands. I myself witnessed the joy with which she nursed them and the wonderful efficacy of her words, which brought about many conversions.” As a result, Catherine was a major inspiration for Mother Teresa and her mission to the poor in Calcutta.

Catherine gave her family's food and clothing to anyone in need. She

volunteered to nurse the ill in hospitals. She visited criminals in Siena's prison. These pious actions caused men and women to gather around her, which Catherine described as a spiritual fellowship bound by mystical bonds of love. As a result, some in Siena regarded her as a saint while others considered her a fanatic.

As her popularity spread, she was summoned to Florence to appear before the general chapter of the Dominicans to determine if her teaching was orthodox. The Catholic Church watched the development of religious movements carefully for fear of a heresy spreading and threatening the church's religious and political relationship with Europe's governments. She was found to possess right teaching, and Raymond de Capua was appointed her confessor. He also acted as her disciple and biographer.

Catherine and her followers first sought social reform in Italy. The church and the various states in the peninsula were massively corrupt and mired in warfare. Church offices were frequently bought and sold. Cardinals split into political factions based on which European monarch provided them with support. The granting of indulgences, in which the Church granted the remission of temporal sins, grew considerably and fell victim to commercial exploitation; professionals sold them on a massive scale.

This heavily politicized church culture provided much fodder for Machiavelli's “The Prince” 150 years later. It is a small wonder that mafia culture has its roots in Italy; warfare in Italy was rooted in the conflict between the papal states and the Tuscan states and its allies. At the time the papacy was situated in Avignon, France rather than Rome due to the power that the French crown had over the church. Italian leagues formed against the pope to return it to Rome and defy the Avignon Papacy, which was later referred as the “Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy.”

Catherine fell under conviction to empty this snake pit. Her consulting abilities acquired in her career as an anchoress were put to the test, albeit on a far more massive scale. She sent letters to the princes and republics of Italy rebuking them for politicking and corruption. Most politicians would have likely crumpled up and thrown away such a letter, but her words carried power. She was beloved by the lay population, and those in high positions knew it. Due to her growing profile as a political intermediary, she was consulted by papal legates about the affairs of the church.

Catherine had scribes write hundreds of letters to clerics, magistrates, and leaders of Italy's city-states to negotiate peace. Her chief aim was to return the papacy from Avignon to Rome. The uneducated tertiary even began writing to Pope Gregory XI in what turned into a long correspondence. She referred to him affectionately as “papa” (pope) rather than the ceremonial “Your Holiness,” kindly, but firmly, urging him to return to Italy. There is question as to how much influence Catherine had on this outcome, but whatever degree it was, she was not someone to be ignored at this time, whether in theological or diplomatic circles.

Papal legates sent her on a diplomatic mission in 1375 after war broke out between Florence, the Holy See, and the French legates. Two powerful Florentine factions united to create a large army and gain independence from the pope's control. She was sent to sway Pisa and Lucca into neutrality and away from an alliance with the anti-papal league. Catherine was a rare figure that was trusted on all sides in this imbroglio. Although she was an ardent defender of the pope, Florence sent her as diplomat to Avignon to make peace. The mission failed, but she clearly made an impression on Gregory, who decided to return to Rome despite the protests of the College of Cardinals and the French King.

In 1378 he sent her to Florence to formalize a peace accord between it and the Holy See. These diplomatic missions put Catherine in considerable danger, as opposing factions often made attempts on her life. This resulted partially from the anchoress being a very polarizing figure in Italy. Some historians believe that Catherine was used as a pawn by the papal legates against other city-states, in particular by her confessor Raymond. There is plausibility to this argument, as all of her correspondence supporting the papal line occurs after 1374, after she was summoned to the general chapter of the Dominican Order.

In 1378 Catherine returned to Rome to assist the papacy during the outbreak of the Western Schism, a split between the Church from 1378 to 1417. After Gregory's death the cardinals elected Urban VI, who proved to be highly unpopular and ill-suited to the post. The majority of the cardinals regretted their decision and elected Robert of Geneva, even though Urban was still ruling, and established his court back in Avignon. There was now a pope and anti-pope set up by the same group. France, Spain, Scotland and Naples recognized Clement; Urban was recognized by North Italy, England, Flanders, and Hungary.

Catherine fiercely advocated for Urban VI against the newly restored French line. Yet the 31-year-old also counseled him that he needed to learn to control his sharp and angry temper. The scolded pontiff was not only obedient, but he sent for Catherine from Siena that she might come to Rome and counsel him. She was widely sought after for her wisdom by other high-ranking church officials, including theologians from Siena, Avignon, and Genoa.

Catherine had significant political success, but she was first and foremost a tertiary and mystic. Ironically, it was her religious conviction that led to her undoing. Catherine's penchant for fasting began to consume her. She ate less and less over the years, sometimes subsisting for months on nothing but the Eucharist. Her confessor Raymond ordered her to eat, but Catherine claimed that she was simply unable to do so. On April 21, 1380 she suffered a paralytic stroke and lost any sensation from the waist down. Eight days later she died at the age of 33.

Her legacy grew rapidly after her death. The phenomena of dying at a young age at the peak of one's fame benefitted Catherine as much as it has Jimi Hendrix or Kurt Cobain today. Fellow Italians compared her writings to those of such skilled countrymen as Dante and Petrarch. Parts of her body were enshrined in St. Dominic's Church as a holy relic that soon became a popular pilgrimage site. In the centuries since then, Catherine has cast a towering influence in theology.

Her most famous work is “The Dialogue,” which analyzes the entire spiritual life of man in the form of conversations between God and a human interlocutor, as represented by Catherine. It is written in the simple, but beautiful Tuscan Italian of the 14th century and has been a classic work of spiritual contemplation for centuries.

In her other writings she is honest concerning the difficulties of life as a Christian mystic. Her visions were not always pleasant encounters with Christ or the saints. She was besieged by terrible temptations and loathsome forms. At brief times, these caused her to believe that she had been forsaken by God. Yet, she always recovered. Miraculous signs abounded in her life. Her biographer writes that in 1375 she received the stigmata, visible signs of the marks of Christ.

Today, Catherine is well-known and beloved for her mercy and kindness to people from all levels of society, from popes to criminals. In 1375 she assisted the political prisoner, Niccolo di Tuldo, at his execution. She actively sought out plague victims when others walled

them off to die in solitude for fear of contracting the mysterious illness. For this reason she is the namesake of many Catholic hospitals today.

And yet Catherine would likely not consider such deeds as the largest feather in her cap. The Italian theologian considered the sentiments behind the action far more important than the action itself. If something was not done for love, then it was not worth doing. In a famous line from “The Dialogue,” she related to her confessor this concept in her characteristic succinct style: You are rewarded not according to your work or your time, but according to the measure of your love.”

Chapter 6:

Margaret I of Denmark (1353-1412): Unifier of Scandinavia

People who visit the Roskilde Cathedral near Copenhagen will notice an impressive sarcophagus bearing the image of a stern, but powerful queen. It is a strange sight to see such an overtly Catholic monument in Denmark, which embraced the Protestant Reformation with open arms in 1536.

It is even stranger that a special bell is rung for her twice a day, a tradition that harkens back to her request that the congregation pray for her soul in Purgatory. The church is something of a theological rebel since it openly proclaims a doctrine about the afterlife that virtually Danish person holds. But it is an appropriate tribute to Margaret I of Denmark, the iconoclastic first queen of Scandinavia that united its three kingdoms and reshaped its culture for centuries to come.

In the time of Margaret's birth in the mid-1350s, Denmark was mired in war and disease. Today it is the land of its namesake pastries, Legos, and scenic windmills, and hardly brings to mind anything but quaint pleasantness; however, centuries ago it was among Europe's most dangerous kingdoms in which to live. By 1400, the plague had overrun Scandinavia, killing half of the population. This included many members of the royal family.

The small peninsular kingdom was perpetually under the threat of war between Sweden and Norway. The royal lines of these three northern kingdoms were deeply intertwined, so the monarchy of each state constantly attempted to subdue the others. This interconnectedness stemmed from each kingdom having an integrated legal system.

It made for a tighter cultural connection, but also easier conquest for each county of the others due to the similarities in jurisprudence. This was the political game in which Margaret lived. She came to play it exceedingly well in the coming decades.

Margaret was born in 1353 in Vordingborg Castle, the youngest of six children, to King Valdemar IV and Queen Helvig. Her siblings included an elder brother Christopher, Duke of Lolland, and elder

sister Ingeborg, Duchess of Mecklenburg. She also had three other siblings who died in childhood. Her father betrothed her at the age of six to Haakon VI of Norway in order to form an alliance and end a war.

The two wed on 1363 when she was 10 and he 23. Margaret spent her early married years under the care of Marta Ulfsdottir, daughter of mystic and monastic founder Saint Brigitta, and did not enter the court at Akershus until she was 16.

During this time she was taught religion, politics and royal manners. Brigitta was something of an international celebrity, so this also afforded young Margaret news of the political events of Scandinavia, along with contact with its most powerful and influential rulers. It was also a tumultuous time for the young princess, as a succession crisis began when her elder brother, Duke Christopher, died. The following year King Haakon was removed from the throne by a popular revolt. When Margaret was 17 she bore her first and only child, Olaf, in 1370.

In the same year Margaret's father Valdemar signed much of his control over Denmark to the Hanseatic League. This was a confederation of cities aligned with northern German states that had conquered much of Sweden's most valuable land. Valdemar was forced to capitulate after a disastrous war in which he suffered heavy territorial losses. At the time of Swedish King Magnus' death, his son Haakon was king of Norway and denied his family's throne. It was shortly thereafter that Margaret's father also died.

The plague was raging in full force, and young Margaret witnessed basic institutions within the Danish kingdom collapse. Due to the massive death toll, entire crops rotted in the fields because there were not enough hands to harvest them. Parishes were abandoned because no clergy could tend to them. Poverty and famine were ubiquitous.

Margaret wrote to Haakon in 1370 begging for basic provisions for herself and her servants: "You must know, my lord, that I and my servants suffer and are in dire need for lack of food and drink, so that neither they nor I get the necessities. And so I beg you that you will find some way out so that things may improve and that those who are with me shall not leave me on account of hunger."

In 1375 Margaret's sister Ingeborg's son was named heir to the Danish throne. Ingeborg was aware of her sister's potential for rule and

convinced the Danish nobles to elect her son Olaf instead and Ingeborg as regent. This was a break with royal succession, as Ingeborg was the eldest daughter. The nobles, however, were willing to concede to her wishes as they disliked Ingebord's husband, who hailed from the north coast of Germany. This area was in heavy political conflict with Denmark. When the five-year-old Olaf was elected, Margaret became his regent. Five years later, in 1380, he was crowned king of Norway upon Haakon's death and Margaret became its de facto ruler at the age of 27.

Her power expanded in 1387 when Olaf died suddenly at the age of 17. Margaret was chosen as the regent of Norway and Denmark, as she had essentially ruled both lands for years anyway. It was uncharacteristic to give a queen such power, but Scandinavia had a stronger history of meritocracy among its monarchs than southern Europe, and the noble class favored Margaret for her effective statesmanship and diplomacy.

In her clashes with Germany she managed to prevail and retake Schlewswig from the Holstein-Rendsburg counts. She now had the territory of Denmark consolidated and was free to focus her attention on Sweden, where nobles were rebelling against their unpopular king Albert. They informed her through diplomatic back channels that if she could force him out of the throne then they would pledge loyalty to her as regent. She invaded Sweden in 1388 and quickly prevailed.

The defeated Swedish monarch was forced to recognize her as "Sovereign Lady and Ruler," at a conference held at Dalaborg Castle. They accepted all her conditions and agreed to recognize the king whom she would appoint. As the first female ruler of a united Scandinavia, there were many opposed to her rule, most notably the royalty that had been outflanked by her superior statesmanship.

The deposed Albert was quite a sore loser and referred to her as "King Pantsless" before his failed attempt to retake Sweden with an army of mercenaries from Mecklenburg. He was thrown in Aasle prison and saw his power base crumble. Her final step was to take Stockholm, at the time a mostly German city, which finally surrendered in 1398.

How was her reign so widely accepted by Scandinavia's nobility and subject class when a female monarch was an unprecedented event in Northern Europe? Margaret had already proven her ability to govern as an enlightened despot. She had ruled in a shrewd yet competent manner and prevented rebellion or civil disorder by keeping the

nobility firmly in check.

Margaret kept neutral in affairs that did not benefit the kingdom, but she had little compunction about regaining lands that Denmark had lost in previous generations. She did so through both peaceful and military means, with little preference of one over the other. She gained possession of Schleswig by purchasing it from Albert of Mecklenburg and the Livonian Order. Hundreds of states fell under control of the crown. She also reformed the Danish currency, replacing the old copper coins with silver.

Much of Scandinavian society was pleased with her competent rule, but not content to live under a female monarch indefinitely. It was expected that Margaret would provide a king for each of her three kingdoms who was a kinsman of each of the three old dynasties. In 1389 she threw them a bone and proclaimed her great-nephew Eric as King of Norway. The nobles conferred this title upon him, though it was another seven years before he was proclaimed king in Sweden and Denmark. In 1401 he was declared of age and officially took the throne, but Margaret acted as an unofficial regent for the rest of her life.

Margaret continued to rule in her young nephew's stead. Her principle goal in naming him ruler of all three realms was to reunite Sweden, Norway, and Denmark under one banner. This Nordic union was formalized in June 17, 1397, by the Treaty of Kalmar, signed in a castle on Sweden's north coast. It stipulated an eternal union between the three kingdoms along with Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Shetland, and Orkney. It lasted in name until 1523 and covered a territory 3,000,000 square kilometers in size, an impressive amount of land; even if much of it was covered with ice and uninhabitable.

While Margaret disliked the clauses that allowed each kingdom to retain possession of its own lands, customs, and administration, she understood the power of compromise. The union fostered political, social, military, and economic stability and cooperation. There were signs that the agreement was not meant to last, however. The Danish and Norwegian seals were not attached to the document, leaving the future up for grabs after choosing Erik as the next leader of the dynasty.

While each state maintained its independence, none were sovereign, much to Margaret's chagrin. She always desired a stronger union between the states to increase their collective strength. She knew of

the recent history of England and its success in consolidating weak realms into one united kingdom. Margaret wanted Scandinavia to project the same level of power in Europe and become a major player in the growing international political sphere. Such a union never came to be, however, and the queen deeply regretted this.

Margaret continued on her father's work of elevating the social, economic and political standing of Denmark among the other European kingdoms. Scandinavia had always been something of a backwater on the continent. It had been culturally isolated from the rest of Europe for a thousand years, developing its own pantheon of gods distinct from Roman and Greek mythology. Zeus and Hera were popular figures of study during the Renaissance but Odin and Thor were not. It was one of the last areas to be Christianized and had threatened its southern neighbors with Viking invasions in centuries past. Attacks from the north had ceased long ago, but the Nordic states were still ostracized by the south. In short, it was the Appalachia or Deep South of Europe.

Margaret remedied its poor reputation. She increased its standing through expanding social programs in the 14th century that her father had begun. She had private castles destroyed and prohibited unsanctioned warfare in order to keep a monopoly on power and decrease lawlessness leaking out of Scandinavia and into the south. Margaret standardized the legal system by strengthening the royal court. She also donated large amounts of money to the Catholic Church, although it is not known if this was done as a means of control over the state religion, a sincere act of piety, or a mixture of the two.

It was several more years before she began seeking a wife for her nephew. As always in medieval Europe, the chief concern of the marriage was political strategy. Eventually he married Philippa, daughter of King Henry IV of England, in 1406. This was not without significant political haranguing or deep suspicions on both sides. Henry wanted to strengthen his alliance with the emergent Scandinavia; in return, he proposed that his own son Henry, the Prince of Wales and future king of England, marry Erik's sister Catherine.

These marriages were intended to create closer bonds between the two kingdoms so that Margaret would assist Henry IV in the Hundred Years War with France. Margaret, however, refused to allow her foreign interests to be so heavily compromised and be drug into a war

that did not concern Scandinavia's interests.

Even after Erik's marriage, Margaret remained the ruler of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway until her death in 1412. This was perhaps the key to her holding power for so many decades: she was an expert at placing young family member's on the throne through whom she could rule, managing to get her children elected king in three divided nations. It was helicopter parenting at its worst, but it worked. This led to an unintended consequence, however.

Before 1389 the three Scandinavian kingdoms required that the sovereign be present in the realm. Rule was therefore a personal affair between a monarch and his subject. In contrast, Margaret ruled Sweden and Norway from Denmark and did not offer those subjects the benefit of her person. The monarchy in Scandinavia became detached and depersonalized in her reign. In later centuries the emerging states were more dependent on efficient bureaucracies that one individual who sat on a throne and issued decrees.

Margaret was a vigorous ruler through the end of her life, which is principally why the conditions of her death remain so mysterious. While on the island of Okseøerne, (meaning "the ox islands", two small islands on the Danish side of Flensburg Fjord), she is believed to have died from the plague. Many theories abound as to possible assassination attempts against her, either from rivals jealous over her iron grip on Scandinavian politics or a disgruntled subject. Both are plausible.

She was under heavy criticism by the end of her reign. Margaret appointed Danish nobles to rule in her stead in Sweden and Denmark rather than locals. Her economic policies also came under fire. According to a Swedish monk: "Albrecht levied heavy taxes, but Margaret made them still heavier. What he left, she took the peasant's horse, ox, and cow; in short, all his possessions."

Margaret's success in consolidating northern Europe under one flag did not survive long after her. Erik continued to rule in Denmark and Sweden until his deposition 1439 and Norway until 1440. Erik was considered to be a weak king compared to his regal mother and unable to balance the competing interests of the three kingdoms. Sweden left the arrangement in 1439 and Norway as well in 1442. While she was unable to leave behind a long-lasting unified Scandinavia, Margaret has another impressive legacy. The indelible imprint she left on medieval life as a powerful female ruler unafraid to

negotiate hardball politics is unmistakable.

Chapter 7:

Joan of Arc (1412-1431): The Maiden of Orléans and History's Most Lethal 'Heretic'

“The character of Joan of Arc is unique. It can be measured by the standards of all times without misgiving or apprehension as to the result. Judged by any of them, judged by all of them, it is still flawless, it is still ideally perfect; it still occupies the loftiest place possible to human attainment, a loftier one than has been reached by any other mere mortal.” And so Mark Twain described the character of the legendary French commander in 1908 as the bravest soul in human history.

But is it true? More specifically, are the tales of her heroic deeds in fact tales, or the remarkable factual accounts of a hero remembered to this day? Much of Joan of Arc's story is so fantastic that it approaches the outer limits of plausibility. A 17-year-old French peasant marches up to the king and demands that she be given the right to command his forces. He agrees, despite her having no education or military experience. She cuts her hair short and wears armor to appear as a man to her enemies on the battlefield.

Against all odds, she leads the army in a string of victories against the English, among the most elite fighting forces in the world. And this is an army composed of *French* soldiers, no less. These victories follow decades of French defeat in the Hundred Years War in which France is on the brink of annihilation. She turns the momentum of the war completely around and pushes the English off the continent. Joan is then captured and executed under trumped-up charges of witchcraft. Decades later she is declared innocent by a papal court, and centuries later canonized to become one of France's five patron saints.

Separating fact and myth in her life is exceptionally difficult, but we have the benefit of a multitude of first-hand sources and testimonies about her life. Joan represented herself when the English put her on trial, and the entire court record survives. The Catholic Church opened a retrial years after her death to clear her of charges of heresy and interviewed over 100 of her personal acquaintances.

According to Stephen Richey's summary of historical opinion about Joan, the interviews reveal a farm girl with an innate genius for

politics and military strategy. She condensed years of learning into a matter of weeks and dealt as an equal with royalty, clerics, and battlefield commanders. As Mozart was able to intuit the workings of a piano and compose symphonies as a child, or Einstein could extrapolate relativity and quantum physics from general mathematics, Joan knew how to place artillery on the chessboard of the battlefield, lead cavalry charges at the weakest point in the enemy lines, storm a fortress, and conduct herself in military matters with as much clear-sightedness as a captain with 30 years' experience. She also time and time again embarrassed any male commander who doubted her abilities.

Perhaps more important than her tactical brilliance, however, was her phenomenal force of will. Joan was on the front rank of every assault against the French that she ordered to be launched. Her squire Jean D'Aulon recounted that in a battle fought near the fort the Augustins, the French were withdrawing back to Orléans when the English launched a surprise attack at the rear of their column. Joan immediately arrived on the scene with the mercenary captain La Hire.

Armed with lances, the two leveled their lances and charged headlong at the enemy. They struck the first blows. The French knights and foot soldiers, emboldened by her bravery, turned and swept the English from the field. In other battles Joan was shot by enemy arrows but always returned to the battlefield in a few hours, if not immediately. At the Tourelles, Joan, with her shining armor and banner, was hit with a projectile and evacuated from the field.

The French were disheartened and the English emboldened. The tide turned once again when she returned a short time later with her wound staunched and banner raised in her good arm. Joan shouted for one more effort; the English trembled with fear while the French regained their courage for a final attack.

Joan was born January 1412 to Jacques d'Arc and Isabelle. She was raised in Lorraine Privine, a pocket of French sovereign territory sandwiched between England and the Holy Roman Empire during the last phase of the Hundred Years War. England had taken control of all of Northern France following victory at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415.

Here the English army, skilled with the longbow, inflicted 6,000 French deaths while only suffering 300. They massacred the French prisoners to prevent rebellion, an act that violated medieval warfare

conventions. Paris had fallen and only Orléans stood between the English and total conquest. It should be mentioned that at this time in history, France and England were far more intertwined than they are today.

France had outright invaded and conquered England in 1066, forever changing its language and culture. Famed English kings such as Richard the Lionheart (d. 1199) owned far more land in France than England and spoke almost no English. The Hundred Years War, therefore, was a succession dispute over the French throne.

She was one of five children born to the well-off peasant couple, as her father held various official posts. Joan spent her early life with domestic agricultural duties and never had a formal education. She could sign her name but was otherwise illiterate. Her informal education came from religious instruction, as Joan was raised in strict piety. Her family and community frequently beseeched God for safety, since they lived in an unstable borderland that was continuously susceptible to attacks from the English.

Death or loss of one's family hung over them. And death was often a grisly affair due to the English use of scorched-earth tactics. They used any means to achieve victory, and they could do so since there were no pesky war crimes tribunals or UN peacekeeping troops to worry about in those days.

France could not mount an effective military response to the English because it consisted of political factions that frequently squabbled and were weakly held together. Its king, Charles VI, suffered from mental illness and believed himself to be made of glass. As a result, France was ruled by opportunistic regents who fought each other for political control. In the 1410s there was an unstable truce between the Orleanist faction led by Duke Louis of Orléans; the Burgundian Duke John the Fearless, the king's cousin; and Duke Charles, who would later become king of France.

Charles assumed the title of heir to the throne after the catastrophic French loss in Agincourt at the age of 14. He lacked strong support but benefited from Joan's implacable belief that he was beloved by God and held the divine right to rule. It was not hard to disqualify the other claimants to the throne for lacking the proper attributes: John the Fearless was assassinated during a meeting between the factions. His replacement, Philip the Good, allied with the English and fought the French.

In 1420 Charles's mother Queen Isabeau of Bavaria granted the succession of the French throne to Henry V of England. Independent France had been whittled down to its heartland of Orléans and a few cities along the Loire River. Everyone expected it to fall.

It was in this turmoil that, according to Joan's testimony at her trial, that at the age of 12 she began to experience visions. She was buttressed into believing them by villagers who told of an apocryphal prophecy by King Arthur's wizard Merlin that a virgin maiden would lead the king to victory and restore France to the French.

Joan also witnessed Michael the Archangel, Catherine of Alexandria, and Margaret of Antioch call upon her to liberate France from English domination and have the Dauphin (Charles VII) crowned as the rightful king. The Archangel Michael was the patron saint of the French Royal army. The means by which Joan would accomplish this command was not lost to her.

Her moment came when the French army had reached its lowest point. In 1428 Charles had lost the allegiance of several towns. The campaign was failing. In January 29, the 16-year-old Joan petitioned the garrison commander Count Robert de Baudricourt at Vaucouleurs to visit the remnants of the royal French court at Chinon. She claimed that God had directed her through the saints to take charge of the French army, defeat the English, and escort Charles to Rheims and have him crowned king.

He unsurprisingly refused the request of the peasant girl. She returned February 1429 with two men of standing. Joan predicted a military reversal near Orléans and that a French failure to break its siege would occur near Rouvray. It was only after news of this reached Count Robert that her prediction was proved true. He reluctantly agreed to send Joan, dressed as a male and escorted by armed guards, to Chinon. It took over a week for Joan to arrive and two more days for her to be introduced to Charles. She presented herself to the uncrowned king with short hair and wearing a man's clothes, although she insisted that she was in fact female.

In a private conference she proclaimed to him that she was brought by God to bring aid to the kingdom. According to her testimony, it was only after she described in accurate detail to the king a private prayer he had made that Charles believed in the divine ordination of her mission. Surprisingly, or perhaps out of desperation with France's

pitiful state, he gave her authority to travel with an relief expedition to Orléans, wear a knight's armor, and be placed at the head of the army. It was an absurd command to give so much power to an illiterate farm girl, but at the time no other options were available and every other alternative had been exhausted.

She was sent to Poitiers to test her religious orthodoxy. Charles worried that other French factions would proclaim her a witch if she held any heretical belief, a plausible scenario considering Joan's unconventionality. A theological commission of inquiry spent three weeks to determine her strength of faith. Charles's mother demanded that they verify her gender and state of her virginity. They concluded that she had an “irreproachable life, [was a] good Christian, possessed of the virtues of humility, honesty, and simplicity.” She might be a bit crazy, they likely thought, but at least she was piously crazy.

The real test came from her participation in the siege of Orléans. The battle was given to her by the clergy to be her ordeal: a medieval trial by which one puts him or herself into mortal danger to see if they have good standing with God and receive his protection. An auspicious event took place before the battle that according to legend proved her heavenly mettle. Instead of using the sword granted by Charles, she went to the chapel of Ste. Catherine-de-Fierbois to find an ancient sword buried behind the altar, where an angelic vision told her it was located. To fight the English, Joan was provided with a white suit of armor and a white banner with an image of God, two angels on either side, and the words “Jesus” and “Mary.” She called on the English to withdrawal from France before the fight. They refused.

In April 1429 she arrived in Orléans, on the verge of falling to the English. The French held it in a defensive position and had tried only one offensive attack during the siege. Joan wanted to surprise the enemy by urging an attack against the English forts nearby. On May 4 they captured a fortress at Saint Loup. The second fell the next day. She pressed the offensive, even defying the war council to continue attacking the English. Over the next eight days they captured every enemy fort in the vicinity, breaking a five-month siege in only a week.

Joan led the charge against the strongholds with no assistance from the commanders of Orléans. Her presence filled the once-invincible English with fear. Jean, Count of Dunois, testified about her impact from the moment she delivered the ultimatum to surrender: “...and I swear that the English, two hundred of whom had previously been

sufficient to route eight hundred or a thousand of the royal army, from that moment became so powerless that four or five hundred soldiers and men at arms could fight against what seemed to be the whole force of England."

The victory shocked the French, who had experienced such a long string of losses that they had forgotten the taste of victory. She convinced King Charles VII to grant her a sortie and allow her and Duke John II of Alençon to launch a counterattack against the English to recover Paris and Reims, the latter held deep in enemy territory. The first battle was the Battle of Jargeau on June 1429. It was the first French offensive in a generation, and 3,000 French soldiers inflicted heavy losses against the 5,000 English. Joan herself led an assault on the city's walls and took a stone projectile directly to the helmet.

It did not stop her; she was one of the first to mount a scaling ladder against the wall and shouted encouragement to the men as she ascended, banner in hand. The fortress fell and the Loire River valley was now clear of English troops. Following other victories, the French delivered a terrible defeat to the English at the Battle of Patay in which a smaller French army of mostly knights that stormed the English long bowmen.

They attacked the English positions before the archers had planted their spears, making them defenseless against a cavalry charge. Joan did not personally fight in this battle, but she did lay out the strategy. Over 2,500 English died, compared to 100 French soldiers.

Many cities of Burgundy, which had allied themselves with the English, surrendered to the French army on July 3. Joan had beseeched Philip the Good that he withdrawal his forces and make peace with Charles VII. Rheims was now recaptured and opened its gates to the French on July 16. In this city was the great cathedral where France's kings had been crowned for generations, and it was here that God had told Joan that Charles would take the crown. He received it with Joan in armor at his side, holding up the banner of France and weeping.

Proving that no good deed goes unpunished, Charles sought to undercut Joan's influence wherever possible after being crowned. A short-term truce was made between Charles and Philip to last over the winter, although the latter used it as a stalling tactic to prepare his defense of Paris, the next city upon which the army was going to march. Charles disbanded the army while large portions of France

were still under hostile enemy occupation. He opened negotiations with the English and the Burgundians.

Joan was exasperated with the French court's timidity and defensive tactics, when it was clear that an offensive strategy had given them so much success. To show her displeasure, she obeyed orders haphazardly in the forthcoming battles. Then she ignored France's defensive strategy completely. Joan made out on her own as an independent captain of a small band of mercenaries. In October she led a smaller attack on Saint-Pierre-le-Moutier and then La-Charite-sur-Loire. These battles were not supported by Charles and the royal court, but she continued to advance.

A truce with England followed shortly after, and Joan spent the next few months tending to religious matters, many of which at this time became the evidence used to canonize her. While she was in Lagny-sur-Marne, Joan and other women of the town prayed over a dead infant so that it might return to life long enough to receive the sacrament of baptism. According to her trial testimony, they were granted their prayer and the child returned to life long enough to receive baptism. Charles, perhaps guilty over behaving in such a milquetoast fashion, ennobled Joan and her family in December 1429, granting them the name Du Lis (of the Lily).

In April 1430 Joan received visions that she would be captured before June 24, Saint John’s Day. They were soon proven correct. In May she and her band of mercenaries entered Compiegne to defend against a Burgundian and English siege. On May 24 she and some of her troops were ambushed near the Mont-de-Clairoix when they were left on the other side of the river when the drawbridge was raised. Joan was completely surrounded and taken captive when she refused to surrender. She was kept prisoner of John of Luxembourg, and Charles made no attempt to rescue her or bargain for her ransom. She was then sold to the Duke of Burgundy for 10,000 francs and turned over to his English allies.

Joan was charged with heresy, witchcraft, and claiming false prophecies, an English pretense to eliminate their most skilled opponent. They called upon the prosecutor Peter Cahcuon, a bishop of Beauvais who desired that the English would appoint him archbishop of Rouen. During her detainment she returned to wearing female clothing but then opted for her armor out of a fear of sexual assault.

She should have been confined to an ecclesiastical prison under the

supervision of nuns but instead they kept her in a normal prison with male inmates. As such, she donned her armor once again and was therefore charged with violating sartorial laws, even though preservation of chastity was a defensible reason to cross-dress according to canon law.

At her trial on January 9, 1431 Joan was denied a legal advisor. It proceeded even though no adverse evidence could be found against her, a violation of court proceedings on a number of grounds. The tribunal consisted of a number of French theologians that were partisan in favor of England. They pestered her endlessly about her visions (which they assumed to be false) and her wearing of male attire.

Since she had no advocate to defend her, she represented herself and spoke her mind plainly. Joan was fearless, blunt, and quick on her feet. As a result, it is from this court record that many famous quotes from Joan survive to this day. When asked if she was mired in witchcraft, she responded, “I would rather die than do something which I know to be a sin, or to be against God's will.”

When pushed to recant her visions, Joan defiantly said, “One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.”

Her acute intelligence was on full display. The illiterate peasant girl managed to outwit the council of clerics with their logical traps. She made them look like fools so consistently that the proceedings were moved from a public court to private chambers. In one such case they asked her if she was or was not in God's grace. The question was a trick. If she answered in the affirmative, the clerics would pester her for claiming to know the mind of God. If she answered in the negative, then she would condemn herself.

Joan found a third way and answered that “If I am not, may God bring me to it; if I am, and may God keep me in it.” The answer stunned the court. The trial also displayed Joan's power of memory. At one point she refused to answer a question because, she said, she had already answered it a week ago. When the scribe said that she was mistaken, she challenged him to consult the court transcript. He did so and Joan was proven to be correct. As Régine Pernoud writes in “The Retrial of Joan of Arc,” she joked to the scribe that if her persisted in his errors that she would pull his ears.

As the trial was a sham from the beginning, the inquisitor Jean LeMaitre, under the threat from the English, led the trial to a guilty verdict, despite the preponderance of evidence against such a ruling. The clerics were English partisans and dependent on them to keep their privileged positions. She was found guilty of 70 counts of sorcery, heresy, prophesying, conjuring, and divining, although it was later reduced to 12. She was condemned to death at the stake. Before being burned, Joan told her accusers that within seven years they would suffer a much worse defeat at Orléans, a prophesy that came true at the battle for Paris in 1437.

Joan of Arc died on May 30, 1431 without recanting. She wore a dress to her execution and requested that two clergy hold a crucifix before her. Joan was led out to the stake at the marketplace of Royen at 8 a.m. She wore a cap which read “Heretic, Relapsed, Apostate, Idolator.” As the pyre burned around her she called out “Jesus,” and according to legend her heart did not burn but was left whole in the ash pile. The executioners, however, made efficient work of her. Joan's body was burnt completely to ashes to prevent the French from collecting her remains and creating a holy relic. Veneration of Joan, they feared, would incite anti-English sentiment. Her ashes were thrown in the River Seine. The 19-year-old's mission had come to an end.

Or did it? Charles VII, perhaps ashamed at his obsequious posturing to the English and the Burgundians, relaunched offensive tactics against that were pioneered by Joan. The nation's renewed spirit, a split in the English-Burgundian alliance, and the accession to the throne of the child Henry VI all factored together to mean French victory in the Hundred Years War.

Following its victory that would have been unimaginable a few years earlier, the Catholic Church set out to reopen Joan's trial of heresy. It did so at the request of her mother Isabelle, who had petitioned the church for years. A nullification trial was held by the Vatican in 1455, initiated by Pope Calixtus III to determine if Joan had been unlawfully executed. According to a panel of theologians, Joan died a martyr's death and the inquisitor had violated ecclesiastical court proceedings on a number of counts. She was declared innocent in 1456 and canonized as a saint in 1920.

The reasons for this unlikely hero's success are manifold, but perhaps the most important one was her moral impact on the French people of

both sexes and all classes. She was the chief source of morale for her soldiers in the middle of pitched battles, causing the courage of the French to soar while that of the English plummeted. Her impact on those who saw or heard her was obvious. She could even incite peasants to take action and fight for their county.

In the battle of Jargeau a force of peasants attempted to storm the fortress walls before the army arrived. They were routed, but the fact that the peasantry was roused to fight in a partisan resistance was a testimony to Joan's charisma and the devotion that she awakened in them. As a result, she became the center of a personality cult that embraced all of France. According to the Journal of the Siege of Orléans, when Joan first entered the city of Orléans to launch the campaign to end the English siege, the people were "making such rejoicing as if they had seen God descend in their midst.

And there was marvelous crowd and press to touch her or the horse upon which she was." That Joan commanded the loyalty of both nobles and commoners had far-reaching effects on France. She midwifed a national consciousness at a time when most commoners were marginalized by the feudal system and had little commitment to their lords or any emotional attachment to them, other than the fear of incurring their wrath.

Other aspects of Joan's legacy are highly debatable. Considering she cut her hair short to resemble a man and wore a male suit of armor in battle, it is tempting to describe her as a proto-feminist who challenged gender norms. This is, however, an anachronism. To say she wore male battle armor is redundant: there was no such thing as female battle armor; it was genderless steel that one wore to prevent injury.

And she fully supported separate roles for the sexes in French military society. Under her command Joan prohibited women from serving in the army and said they supported the military cause more effectively on their homesteads. She herself was only exempted from this prohibition because of God's specific order for her to fight, which vetoed gender norms.

Furthermore, she exhorted the French soldiers to piety and become faithful in attending mass and making confession. She drove prostitutes from the army camp while brandishing her sword. She scolded nobles and soldiers for foul language.

From a scientific perspective, some psychologists have questioned if Joan's voices that she claimed to be from the saints were signs of schizophrenia. They argue that while Joan's sincerity in believing them to be true is plausible, the voices likely derived from her own subconscious. The latter theory seems a bit unconvincing for a skilled commander who retained clear focus on the battlefield, convinced nobles to follow her orders, and outwitted interrogators. Nor did her condition deteriorate over the years, which would be the typical case for an unmedicated schizophrenic. If Joan did suffer from such a deep level of mental illness, she handled it so well as to almost be considered a miracle.

Due to the unconventional nature of Joan of Arc's life, perhaps conventional methods of historical inquiry have their limits about how much of it we can grasp. Explaining everything she accomplished – changing the destiny of her nation despite being a low-born woman of the Third Estate in a male dominated society – cannot be done in purely rational terms.

Perhaps C. S. Lewis is right that no ordinary explanation will do when we are dealing with the extraordinary: “Many people think one can decide whether a miracle occurred in the past by examining the evidence ‘according to the ordinary rules of historical inquiry.’ But the ordinary rules cannot be worked until we have decided whether miracles are possible, and if so, how probable they are.”

Chapter 8:

Queen Isabella I of Castile and Leon (1451-1504): Reformer, Catholic Monarch, Inquisitor

Isabella became Queen of Castile as a politically inexperienced 23-year-old caught in a political tug-of-war between her half-brother and the Spanish nobles. Upon her death in 1504, she had successfully united Spain's kingdoms, completed the Reconquista, stabilized the economy, and commissioned an idealistic Genoese sailor to find a shorter sea route to India by crossing the Atlantic in 1492.

Funding such trips to the New World was a significant reason that Spain became a global power in the next century. These brighter moments are contrasted by the darker ones in her 28-year reign. She and her husband Ferdinand compelled all Jews and Muslims to convert to Christianity, expelling those who refused. This policy laid the legal infrastructure for the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition in the coming century, which, to paraphrase Monty Python, nobody expected. How were these two aspects of Isabella character reconciled in her lifetime?

Born April 22, 1451 in Madrigal de las Altas Torres, Isabella was the daughter of King John II of Castile and Isabella of Portugal. Isabella's extended family was a circuit board of royalty: Her mother was the second wife of King John II, who had a son, Henry IV, by his first wife. His second son, Alfonso, was from Isabella’s mother. The three of them were the only children of King John II. Rivalry between the younger Isabella and her half-brother Henry IV consumed the early part of Isabella's reign, as did cleaning up the mess that Henry IV left behind.

When Isabella was only 3 her father died, and Henry became king. He was 26 years her senior and entrusted with the care of her and the newborn Alfonso, who were both kept in the run-down castle of Arevalo. She was placed in the court of Segovia upon the birth of Henry's daughter and there received a theological and classical education. During her childhood, Henry fought to hold Spain's kingdoms together, a battle the nobles saw that he was clearly losing.

They demanded that Henry name his young brother Alfonso as his successor, as he would be easier to manipulate than Henry's own

daughter Joanna. They pushed Alfonso to seize the throne, warred with Henry at the Battle of Olmedo in 1467, and forced Henry to name Alfonso his successor. However, Alfonso died a year later, making the child's enthronement moot. Isabella was next in line for succession and rebels who wished to depose Henry immediately threw their support behind her.

The 17-year-old royal refused to be a tool in their political machinations and instead sought a diplomatic solution. Isabella told Henry she would support his reign if she were named his successor apparent instead of his daughter Joanna. Isabella added an additional term to their agreement that he would not force her into any marriage or betrothal as long as she obtained Henry's consent.

The throne was not yet Isabella's. As she waiting patiently for Henry's reign to come to an end, Isabella quietly fortified alliances with the nobility and clergy, securing the support of key figures in Iberia. These years of maneuvering and subterfuge provided her with valuable experience for the brutal world of Spanish politics. Her first test came when she needed to choose a marriage partner that would diminish Henry's reign, as she knew that her brother would betroth her to anyone who secured for him the most power and would diminish her future prospects for rule.

He became distracted when a civil war broke out in the 1460s due to his incompetence as a sovereign. Henry needed a powerful new ally who could pay a dowry into the bankrupt treasury. While he sought a wealthy suitor for Isabella, she promised in secret to marry her second cousin Ferdinand of Aragon, the one to whom she was first betrothed at the age of 6. His father John II agreed to the arrangement via secret negotiations.

The two married on October 19, 1469 in a covert operation when Isabella escaped her brother's court by pretending to visit her brother's tomb in Avilla. Ferdinand entered Castile in disguise. He was an ideal partner to boost Isabella's political power, as he ruled Sicily and was heir to the kingdom of Aragon. When Henry died five years later, Isabella was declared Queen of Castile.

A succession dispute immediately erupted, and it soon turned into war. Isabella's ability to govern was quickly tested by a betrayal that her brother committed from beyond the grave. Henry had, before his death, broken his promise to Isabella and named his daughter Joanna the queen and heir. She was also to marry King Alfonso V of Portugal,

whom Henry had originally wanted Isabella to wed.

Alfonso declared war on Castile and Aragon in an attempt to claim back the throne from Isabella. The two sides fought to a stalemate in 1476, but Ferdinand won the propaganda war by declaring Spanish victory to foreign kingdoms. Alfonso failed to secure the alliances necessary to secure victory for Portugal, Isabella had her daughter – also named Isabella – sworn in as heiress to their domains. Their dynasty was secured.

Ferdinand and Isabella determined to rule their kingdoms as one by uniting their domains of Aragon and Castile into one Spanish state. Pope Alexander VI oversaw their union, in which they held equal authority in the government in their dominions, as expressed by the motto *Tanto monta; monta tanto* ("As much as the one is worth, so much is the other").

In addition to being an effective marriage contract, it was a prudent ruling strategy. One monarch could maintain the home front while the other fought battles abroad. When Ferdinand was occupied with a foreign war, Isabella suppressed a 1476 rebellion in Segovia by personally riding into the city and negotiating with rebels, all against the wishes of her advisors.

With their kingdom stabilized, Isabella set up many goals. The first was to weaken the nobles, whom she remembered had schemed to weaken her family's reign. In medieval Spain they exercised an almost independent authority from the crown and were much of the reason that political unification of the Iberian Peninsula had taken centuries. Isabella and Ferdinand accomplished this by co-opting the *Santa Hermandad* (Holy Brotherhood) in 1476, formerly a vigilante group that sporadically patrolled the countryside.

They turned it into into a crown-authorized law enforcement agency, and the *Santa Hermandad* were commissioned to execute and uphold civil and criminal codes. Before these reforms had taken effect, rural Spain resembled something like Afghanistan or inner-city Los Angeles. Local tyrants, warlords, and gang leaders controlled these regions and executed laws that were largely crafted for their own benefit. Urban officials rarely intervened. Petty criminals were everywhere and crime was an unfortunate way of life. After the reforms, highwaymen and robbers that filled Spain's rural areas were brought under control, imprisoned, deported, or executed. Crime rates plummeted throughout the kingdom.

Second, they consolidated the justice system and reduced corruption. Isabella eliminated an entire category of royal counselor that consisted of those with personal connections to the monarch. By doing so she strengthened the body of professional administrators, nobles, and bishops that performed bureaucratic and judicial duties. This reform signaled a rupture with the medieval style of government that depended on a messy web of political alliances connected in the middle to the monarch and a few royal advisors.

It was replaced with an early modern system of a government bureaucracy that ensured the machinery of the state continued to function from one ruler to the next. This depersonalized model of government came to dominate Europe over the coming centuries, and it allowed a certain level of automation. That way the state would not fall apart if one royal took a throne from another royal by violent means, or if the queen failed to produce a son.

The implementation of this new system had long-lasting impact on the country. Spain in the medieval period was a messy confederation of kingdoms constantly fracturing and reforming, but Spain's borders in the time of Isabella more or less resembled those of today.

That is not to say that Isabella and Ferdinand were passive rulers disinterested in their subjects' lives. To the contrary, they had more direct contact with them than any previous Castilian ruler. As Irene Plunkett writes, the two monarchs set aside time each Friday in which subjects from their domains could approach them with complaints. Isabella established a tribunal known as the *Sala de Justicia* (Hall of Justice) to handle legal matters. She was not trained in law but established herself as a chief magistrate and appointed legal experts to serve as specialists in difficult cases.

Isabella presided over the body from an elevated chair covered in gold cloth and placed on a raised platform. Within months she settled so many cases and issued such harsh sentences that Sevillians became fearful of wrongful imprisonment or execution. Some of those who were guilty but not yet apprehended fled the city to Portugal or Moorish territory. She later agreed to show more mercy after the Bishop of Cadiz admonished her. Heresy was the only crime that she refused to punish less severely.

Her last major reform movement was to control the kingdom's finances. Henry had made a mess of things by offering extravagant

land grants to nobles at fire sale prices. As the medieval equivalent of a Detroit politician, he could scratch the backs of his friends but by doing set his kingdom on a collision course with bankruptcy. This drastically shrunk the kingdom's stable tax base. Isabella revoked grants which the Cardinal of Spain determined had not been given as a reward for service but simple cronyism.

Those had been sold below their value were bought back at the same amount. This policy, combined with consolidating the kingdom's mints, restored public confidence in Spain's finances. The Spanish currency, the *real*, grew stronger and became popular in international trade and commerce. It would be the standard monetary unit across the Mediterranean and the New World for generations to come.

It was in the context of Spain's political unification that the most infamous acts of Isabella's reign occurred: the expulsion of the Jews and the launching of the Spanish Inquisition. These arose in response to the Catholic monarchs taking complete control of Spain's southern territories from Muslim emirates that had ruled it since 711. The Moorish province of Granada in southern Andalusia was the last holdout in the Reconquista, the centuries-long war in which Christian Spaniards reclaimed Iberia from the Muslim emirates, which had not advanced for almost two centuries.

Ferdinand led the battle against the Moorish commander Cid Hiaya and conducted numerous sieges while Isabella managed the government and personally visited the soldier camps. Granada finally surrendered on January 2, 1492. Against this backdrop of forging a united Catholic Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella issued an expulsion order to its Jews and requested a papal bull to launch the Spanish Inquisition. It was a result of the crown doubting the loyalties of its Jewish and Muslim subjects, fearing they would collaborate with enemy states.

The expulsion order was issued on March 31, 1492 to Spain's Jews. Their only other options were to convert to Christianity or be executed. Some historians believe the order was given to specific cities under an erroneous belief that their Jews admitted the Moorish invaders in the eighth century and represented a danger to Spain's security. The text of the decree implicates Jews for trying “to subvert their holy Catholic faith and trying to draw faithful Christians away from their beliefs.”

Henry Kaman estimates that 40,000 converted, while an additional

40,000 left for Italy, North Africa, Poland, or the Ottoman Empire. The authenticity of the faith of those who stayed and converted to Christianity remained in question, however. The Spanish Inquisition, which was under direct control of the monarchy and not the papacy in Rome, was established to maintain the orthodoxy of the *conversos*, the converted Jews. Those convicted, tried, and found guilty of heresy were executed. Estimates of those killed in the Inquisition range from 3,000 to 30,000.

Isabella and Ferdinand's fixation with increasing Spain's power brought disastrous results to its non-Christians, but when one moves away from the expulsion orders and interrogations, many positive effects of their proactive policies can be found. Their naval competition with England and Portugal serendipitously helped launched the Age of Exploration. As they warred with Portugal in the 1470s, the Castilians sought dominion in the Atlantic and the wealth from Africa's western coast in gold and slaves.

After a three-year war, the Treaty of Alcáçovas granted the Catholic Monarchs more power in the Iberian Peninsula, but almost no access to the African coast. They had no rights to navigation or to commerce south of the Canary Islands. Therefore, they needed to find another route to overseas wealth and expansion.

Isabella was convinced by the Genoese navigator Christopher Columbus to sponsor his voyage to Asia. With the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the land route to China and India had become far more difficult and dangerous. He had previously been rejected by Genoa, Venice and Portugal. Isabella was far keener to entertain the venture as a means to work around the limitations imposed by the Treaty of Alcáçovas.

Against the recommendations of her advisors, who found Columbus's calculations of the distance to Asia to be grossly underestimated, she consented. Isabella provided him with a generous annual allowance and furnished him with a letter ordering all Spanish cities to provide him with free food and lodging. His voyage to the New World is legendary and requires no further explanation here, but when Columbus returned with gold and natives, the future opportunities of expansion and conquest available to the Spanish crown became manifestly apparent. His discovery of the New World gave the Spanish unlimited access to land, resources, and a much larger footprint on the Atlantic than the Portuguese.

This conquest opened the door to Spain's exploitation of the New World's native population, but Isabella did her best to safeguard their interests in the early days of colonization. When Columbus returned to her court with slaves in tow, she insisted they be returned and freed and that the native inhabitants be afforded justice and fairness. Under her command the Secretariat of Indian affairs was organized in 1503 to protect them against abuse by colonists (which clearly did not succeed in the century to come). Her wishes were reflected decades later by Bartolomé de las Casas, the famed Spanish priest and fierce advocate for Latin America's native population in the face of their enslavement and exploitation by the conquistadores.

Isabella was a strong proponent of education, and her efforts had large ripple effects in Europe. She was an avid book collector, took up Latin in her 30s, and formed a palace school to educate her children, nieces, and nephews. They learned philosophy, mathematics, classical languages, and vocational arts such as weaving. Her level of educational attainment influenced other women of nobility to study advanced fields of natural philosophy, namely Lucia Medrano, Princess Joan, and Princess Catherine, who later became the queen of England.

Ferdinand and Isabella hoped to forge a Spanish Empire by betrothing their children to Europe's most powerful monarchs. The medieval period of fractured kingdoms was giving way to the early modern period of transcontinental empires, and Spain wanted to be on the forefront of this political evolution. They sought political dominance through territorial expansion and marriage alliances.

However, tragedy soon befell their five children: Isabella, John, Joan, Maria and Catherine. John died in 1497 shortly after his marriage to Archduchess Margaret of Austria. In 1498 Isabella, who ruled as Queen of Portugal, died in childbirth. Catherine married the infamous Henry VIII of England, but they divorced when she could not produce for him a male heir. Joanna was unfit to rule due to her insanity.

Isabella died in 1504 at the Medina del Campo with the future of her nascent empire in doubt. Ferdinand ruled alone for 12 more years before his death. He was succeeded by their grandson Carlos I, later known as Charles V. In an epilogue to their royal life that would have surely pleased Isabella, Charles was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1519.

He united Hapsburg lands with Spanish lands and became the most

powerful ruler in Europe in the 16th century. Charles ruled for 40 years and his empire spanned Europe, the Far East and the Americas, covering over four million square miles. His reign was so powerful that many theologians openly wondered if he would conquer Islam once and for all and usher in the return of Christ.

Yet this massive political stage upon which Charles acted was constructed by Isabella's careful efforts. She was an astute politician who, for better and for worse, crafted the political and cultural institutions that forged the modern world. She was respected for her character and insightful wisdom. She promoted the arts and ushered in the Spanish Renaissance. She reformed the legal and administrative system. With her husband she unified its domains and forged a Spanish empire that dominated global politics and trade in the next century. They were a couple of such enormous influence that they made Bill and Melinda Gates look like Britney Spears and Kevin Federline by comparison.

Her far-reaching influence can be seen in an unexpected example. Isabella became an American icon in the early 20th century when the young nation was consolidating its history and laying claim to its early heroes. Since she commissioned Columbus's voyage, the Spanish queen was something of an honorary early American. As a result, she was the first woman to be featured on a U.S. Postage stamp. She was also the first woman to appear on a U.S. Coin, beating out Susan B. Anthony by over eight decades and Sacajawea by nine.

As a ruler obsessed with controlling the national mint, Isabella likely would have appreciated that.

Chapter 9:

Elizabeth I of Tudor (1533-1603): The Virgin Queen that Heralded England's Golden Age

Elizabeth is, with little debate, the greatest monarch in England's history. She is a key figure in the island's transition from the medieval to the early modern era. In her 45-year reign Good Queen Bess transformed her nation from a mid-level European power into the dominant commercial, naval, and cultural force of the Western world. She was a patron of exploration and supported Sir Francis Drake's expedition to circumnavigate the globe. Elizabeth also funded Sir Walter Raleigh's exploration of the New World. She forged a powerful English national identity by securing peace and stability, allowing the arts to flourish and famous figures such as Edmund Spencer, Francis Bacon, and William Shakespeare to produce their most renowned works.

Elizabeth I ranks high in the pantheon of British royalty, but her road to the throne was fraught with difficulty and the likelihood of execution. She grew up in the whirlwind of marriages, divorces, and offspring that defined the court of her father, Henry VIII. Elizabeth's mother was Anne Boleyn, mistress to Henry during his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon and his second wife when he divorced Catherine for failing to produce a son.

She gave birth to two children, only one of whom survived, Princess Mary, who became a fierce political rival to Elizabeth in her youth. Anne birthed Elizabeth within wedlock, making the latter a princess, but she lost this title when her mother's marriage ended when she also could not produce a male heir for Henry. When Elizabeth was two, Henry terminated this marriage through legal means by falsely accusing the queen of infidelity and incest with her brother George Boleyn.

To substantiate these charges he had five men, including George, murdered for “defiling” his bed. Anne was executed by beheading in the Tower of London. Henry then married Jane Seymour 11 days later. She finally gave him a son, Prince Edward.

Elizabeth was born September 7, 1533 at Greenwich Palace. She and her siblings suffered a rocky childhood due to their father's serial

monogamy. After Henry's divorce with Catherine, her half-sister Mary was declared illegitimate and her title as Princess of Wales revoked. Elizabeth was born first in line into royal succession but had that privilege revoked as well. She was disinherited as a princess with her mother's execution and father's subsequent remarriage. Her half-brother Edward jumped first in line to the throne, followed by Mary, with Elizabeth third in line. She lived in Edward's household after her parents' separation.

The young Elizabeth still managed to attain the benefits of a royal upbringing. The tutors in of the household taught her to play the lute and a piano-like instrument called the virginal. She received language instruction and attained high levels of proficiency in English, Greek, Flemish, Welsh, Scottish, and French. From an early age she demonstrated a fierce intelligence and carried the dignity of an adult. She was well versed in history, astronomy, mathematics, geography, poetry, and composition.

At the age of 11 she translated a long religious poem from French into English and gifted it to Catherine Parr, her father's sixth and final wife. Throughout her life she translated literary works into English as a form of recreation. She became conversationally fluent in six languages, and later in life was even able to dress down foreign diplomats in Latin, a necessary exercise since the English language held little currency in international diplomatic circles during the 16th century.

Henry died in 1547 when Elizabeth was 13. Edward became king at the age of 10, taking up the title Edward VI. Due to his age, his regents ruled in his stead, but Edward already bore many hallmarks of his father. The young ruler followed Henry's Protestant faith, as did Elizabeth, while Mary was a devout Catholic in the mold of her Spanish mother. It was a highly volatile matter to have different branches of Christendom in one royal family.

The main impetus for the violence that had engulfed Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the Protestant-Catholic divide, and England was in perilous danger of falling into the same pit. It was not until Elizabeth's reign that the Catholic population was successfully pacified by her granting them significant concessions for religious freedom.

Upon Edward’s death in 1553 at the age of 17, Mary ascended to the throne even though Edward had appointed Lady Jane Grey as his

successor. He chose her to maintain Protestant rule of the country and out of fear that neither of his siblings were suitable to lead. Mary was an illegitimate Catholic and Elizabeth would likely marry a foreigner and drag England into an unnecessary war on the continent. Jane did rule for nine days until the 37-year-old Mary displaced her.

She and her fiancé, Phillip of Spain, immediately installed Catholicism as the religion of the state and launched a reign of terror on England. Hundreds of Protestants whom she suspected of conspiracy against her were killed. When a plot to overthrow Mary and install Elizabeth as queen was discovered, Mary had Elizabeth imprisoned in the Tower of London for two months, typically the last stop before execution, though Elizabeth claimed no knowledge of the plot.

Mary likely feared a Protestant rebellion if Elizabeth were to be beheaded so she released the princess after two months and allowed her to return to Hatfield. She never vied for her sister's throne during Mary's turbulent five-year reign. Upon her death of cancer in 1558, Elizabeth was crowned and began her long reign.

She declared on becoming queen that “this is the doing of the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes,” quoting from Psalm 118. The 25-year-old, golden red-haired queen rode smiling to her coronation through the streets of London in January 1559. She was surrounded by 1,000 of her courtiers in full regal splendor. Doug Steward of the Smithsonian describes the scene as one of elation following Mary's unpopular reign. Elizabeth stopped the procession occasionally to accept bouquets, a Bible, a purse of coins, and even a sprig of rosemary from an elderly women. “I will be as good unto you as ever a queen was to her people,” she said to the delighted onlookers.

Despite England breathing a sigh of relief after Mary's death, Elizabeth was immediately distrusted by some of her subjects. England had a long history of being ruled by queens, but never by a queen alone. A king was always by her side, even if he was a foreigner who threatened England's sovereignty, like Mary's husband Phillip II. Critics took notice, and Scottish Reformer John Knox published a polemic against female monarchs in 1558. It was entitled “The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women.”

He argued from scriptural passages that “God, by the order of his creation, has [deprived] women of authority and dominion” and from history that “man has seen, proved, and pronounced just causes why it should be.” The fiery Protestant Knox wrote the piece originally

against England and Scotland's Catholic monarchs, but Elizabeth quickly took notice. She directly opposed his involvement in the Protestant cause in England after 1559.

She had many political fires to put out at home and abroad. England was at war with France when Elizabeth ascended the throne, and it cut deeply into state finances. Furthermore, her nation was in danger of falling into religious civil war. Among her first major acts was to stymie the religious violence in England and prevent warfare between Protestants and Catholics. In her first session in parliament in 1559 she called for the passage of the of Act of Supremacy, which re-established the Church of England following Mary's suppression during her reign, and the Act of Uniformity, which consolidated the Anglican Church.

In 1563 she oversaw the passage of the church's 39 Articles, which was a compromise between the two denominations but gave preference to Protestantism as the state religion. It was a *via* media, or "middle path" between the beliefs of the Catholic Church and the English Puritans. This suited Elizabeth well, as it had her father, who did not want to leave the Roman Catholic papacy power to sanction royal marriages, particularly at time when the Holy See was closely connected to the Spanish crown. However, she was far more diplomatic to England's Catholics than her father, who closed down monasteries and killed thousands of dissidents. Pope Pius V did not return the favor and excommunicated her in 1570.

Despite this rebuffing, Elizabeth maintained peace with Catholic France and Spain throughout much of her reign. She ended the war with the French through the assistance of her advisor William Cecil. Elizabeth kept out of Protestant uprisings in Europe, even if it would have meant a co-religionist ally on the continent. Although she provided nominal support to the spread of the Protestant Reformation into the Netherlands and Belgium, Elizabeth declined to intervene when Spain persecuted and subdued them. At home she was even less interested in religious division. Elizabeth preferred to stay out of the private lives of her subjects when it came to personal piety. "I have no desire to make windows into men's souls," she said.

But she did not shy away from conflict when compromise was not possible. Phillip of Spain learned of this character attribute when he attempted to check the growing colonial power of England. Spain controlled far-flung colonies in North and South America, the Philippines, and small holdings in between. Phillip knew that England

was one of the few kingdoms that had the naval resources to prevent his plans for limitless overseas expansion. In 1588 he sent the Spanish Armada in an attempt to dethrone Elizabeth, place a papal-approved royal on the throne, and end England's privateering in the Atlantic and Pacific.

Elizabeth prepared to counter the massive invasion fleet. She levied armies, raised fleets, and called for all maritime towns to furnish ships. Twenty thousands troops were distributed throughout England's southern shores to prepare for the Armada's landing. Elizabeth personally visited this encampment to review the troops. She rode on horseback along the lines, wearing a corset of polished steel over her dress, bearing a general's truncheon.

Speaking to her men at Tilbury before they set off to fight the Spanish, she told them that should Phillip land, she would fight by their sides in the heaviest of pitched battle: “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart of a king; and I am ready for my God, my kingdom, and my people, to have that body laid down, even in the dust. If the battle comes, therefore, I shall myself be in the midst and front of it to live or die with you.”

She was fortunate that these words were not put to the test – Spain's Armada was famously bludgeoned by bad weather and fired upon by the smaller English vessels – but few of her troops doubted that she would have lived up to them if necessary.

Throughout her reign, Elizabeth contended with conspiracies to remove her from the throne. The most famous of such incidents came from her cousin Mary Stuart, better known as Queen of Scots. She attempted numerous times to instigate a Catholic uprising and solicit the support of other European Catholic rulers. She united Scotland with France in 1558 by marrying the future King Francis II and left for the continent to exchange nuptials and plan her rebellion. Mary returned in 1561 upon his death and plotted to take England's throne through the help of its native Catholics.

Elizabeth realized that her cousin had to be dealt with. She was reticent to kill a royal and kinsman, but after the 1567 Babington plot assassination attempt, Elizabeth signed her death sentence. Mary threw herself at her mercy, but to no avail. She was found guilty of conspiracy, imprisoned for 20 years, and finally executed at Fotheringhay Castle. According to an account of her 1587 death, after her beheading, the executioner picked up her head by the hair. He

was stunned when her wig remained in his hand while the head rolled away, revealing grey locks.

Elizabeth oversaw the political and economic expansion of England through the aid of her excellent administrators. William Cecil, her secretary of state, set out to strengthen the Royal Navy, expanding English power. Cecil also crafted the long-term goal of uniting the British Isles by creating an Anglo-Scottish alliance and conquering Ireland, a goal that was not realized in Elizabeth's reign. Her other secretary, Francis Walsingham, ran Elizabeth's intelligence service and served as her spymaster. Through his contacts from agents in European mercantile communities and courts abroad, he was able to put down invasions and political plots. Walsingham even gained intelligence from ambassadors to Spain and learned detailed information about the Spanish Armada's planned attack.

Known as the 'Virgin Queen,' Elizabeth remained single throughout her life. It was for this chaste attribute that in England's golden age of exploration, Sir Walter Raleigh named the new American colony "Virginia." For the first 20 years of her reign, it seemed as if all marriageable princes of Europe sought to share the English throne with her. Elizabeth entertained courtships from Scotland, France, Spain, Sweden, and the Holy Roman Empire.

For her, however, it was essentially a ploy. If she had married a foreigner, such as France's Phillip, then she risked losing popular support. If she had married another English noble, then it risked throwing England back into the domestic factionalism that frequently plagued its politics. Yet it was not without significant pressure that she remained single, particularly early in her reign. England's parliament publicly called on the new queen to marry, that there might be a number of young princes in training to become kings and take power upon Elizabeth's death. They feared a bloody succession battle and a return to war between Catholic and Protestant factions. In her typically blunt manner, Elizabeth rebuked Parliament for its effrontery. It is "a strange thing that the foot should direct the head in so weighty a cause," she scolded.

Despite her singleness, much rumor surrounds her romantic liaisons. Whether or not they are true, her possible dalliances are a pop phenomenon that has inspired the plots for hundreds of second-rate harlequin novels set in Tudor times. Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, was the most famous of her personal favorites in court. He was accomplished and successful, a handsome horseman and jouster.

Although married, Robert was advanced by Elizabeth into high offices and honors, keeping him close by in court as they openly flirted with each other. When his wife died, rumors swirled around the court of their possible nuptials. Rumors also swirled around the mysterious circumstances of her death, in which she suffered a broken neck after falling down a flight of stairs; some whispered that it was a homicide. The popular sentiment believed that Robert murdered his wife in hopes of entering the palace and the royal bedchamber. Many already considered him an untalented sycophant and court favorite; being a suspected criminal did not endear him to the people any more. Elizabeth was aware of the power dynamics in their relationship as well, and frequently teased him about the subject: “You are like my little dog; when people see you, they know I am nearby.”

Yet her regard for him grew. She made him Earl of Leicester and granted him the Castle of Kenilworth, along with all its estates. This was a vast property whose annual revenues immediately made him wealthy. She visited him frequently. In one famous occasion he provided an expensive reception for her and her retinue that lasted for days and spared no expense. In the castle's moat a vessel shaped like a dolphin held a band of musicians, playing music for her as she entered. The entertainment continued for 19 days. The royals took in all forms of entertainment; plays, bear-baiting, fireworks, mock fights, and feasting.

Whatever the true nature of their relationship, Elizabeth's interests inevitably returned to the throne and not in romantic liaisons. There is no evidence that their relationship was physical, although plenty of speculation circulated England on that matter. Robert resigned himself to the fact that the public would never accept him. He eventually gave up hope of becoming her husband and married Lettice Knollys, the widow of the Earl of Essex. He kept their wedding secret from Elizabeth, which was a wise precaution. When she discovered his marriage, her jealousy immediately flared. He was thrown in prison for crossing her, but eventually released and restored to good standing with the queen.

Elizabeth's personality was fittingly larger-than-life. She wore enormously expensive royal gowns made with gold and silver. She was something of a fashionista and adorned with expensive and exotic jewelry. As she aged and her hair thinned, she wore elaborate wigs in shapes of globes, leaves, pyramids, and other constructions that would make Lady Gaga blush. Due to smallpox scars left behind from a near-

fatal bout in 1562, she wore heavy white make-up, which was fashionable at the time.

Elizabeth would appear as a theatre character today, which was fitting considering her love of pomp and circumstance. As Jacob Abbott accounts, in one instance she attended church accompanied by 1,000 men in full steel armor and 10 cannons, with drums and trumpets sounding. Foreign ambassadors were received with military spectacles and shows, banquets, and parties. She sometimes made excursions on the River Thames with whole fleets of boats and barges in her train, as swarms of spectators watched from the shoreline, waving flags and banners.

Elizabeth died in 1603 of blood poisoning from rheumatism and possibly pneumonia. She was succeeded by James VI of Scotland, the son of Elizabeth's first cousin once removed, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. It was the end of the House of Tudor, which had ruled England for over a century. Shortly before her death, Elizabeth stood before Parliament in 1601 and announced that it would be her final Parliament. She turned the speech into a self-reflective oratory; it was later known as the Golden Speech and marked a symbolic end to her reign. She addressed the love she had for England, her position, and the parliamentarians herself.

With her health failing, she commented on the achievements of her half-century long reign and considered herself the maternal protector of England. “For myself I was never so much enticed with the glorious name of a King or royal authority of a Queen as delighted that God hath made me his instrument to maintain his truth and glory and to defend his kingdom as I said from peril, dishonor, tyranny and oppression.... You may have many a wiser prince sitting in this seat, but you never have had, or shall have, any who loves you better. It is not my desire to live or to reign longer than my life and reign shall be for your good.”

Despite all her power, regal splendor, and flaunting her success of ruling as a woman in a man's world, Elizabeth, to the end, considered her life as a sacrificial one given to her people. She was to her people what a mother was to its child. Yet she was also an inspiration to women that female figures were capable of wielding considerable power and putting fear into the hearts of their male adversaries. She carved out her own place as a queen when few models existed for doing this successfully.

She turned her liability of being an unmarried woman into an asset: poets of the day described the queen as Diana, the chaste goddess of the moon. Stewart describes how that particular memory of her existed long after her death in the American colonies. In the 1640s the poet Ann Bradsteet celebrated the memory of “That High and Mighty Princes Queen Elizabeth” by responding to all male contemporaries in New England society who considered her sex inferior:

Let such as say our sex is void of reason,
Know 'tis a slander now, but once was treason.

Chapter 10:

Ottoman Valide Kösem Sultan (1590-1651): The Harem Slave Who Ruled Through Three Sultans

In the final chapter of this book we move out of Western Europe and into the Ottoman Empire to explore the life of Kösem Sultan, the mother of three sultans. She is a more exotic figure than the other women presented here, not for the particular actions of her life, but that Kösem's society is likely more foreign to the reader. If the lives of medieval women in general are generally misunderstood, the lives of those in the Middle East are completely alien.

The images that come to mind are not positive: peasant women completely shrouded in black and forced to walk ten paces behind their husband, resembling the condition for women in Saudi Arabia today. On the higher end of the social strata, the numerous wives and concubines of the sultan were locked away in a harem and forced to attend to whatever carnal whims entered his mind.

In many ways women had fewer rights in the late medieval Middle East than their European counterparts. Sharia law permitted a man to have up to four wives. Divorce between the two parties was simple to obtain for a man. All it required was a husband to repeat the dictum, “I divorce you” three times. It was so simple, in fact, that Ottoman court records are full of situations in which divorce occurred by accident when one party said the statement in jest and did not realize that his words were legally binding. If television existed back then, these incidents would have made for a great arbitration-based court reality show.

While men could divorce easily, a women's ability to initiate a divorce carried a financial penalty and was more restrictive. The conditions for royal women were not much better. The Ottoman sultans did not marry foreign queens, rather their wives were of slave origin and came from the harem. Since royal Ottoman concubines and wives were almost invariably from Christian lands in the Balkans, Armenian, or the Crimea, nearly all the Islamic sultans had a non-Muslim, non-Turkish woman as their mother. This marriage system was likely a reason why the Ottoman Empire lasted for six centuries. Unlike medieval Europe, fiefs and domains were not constantly being contested due to royal marriages and the uniting of their lands to

different households.

In other ways, however, Middle Eastern women were given significant freedoms and sometimes had more rights than their European counterparts. They were landholders and had the right to control property. Some held fiefs used to pay for the state's military expenses. Women could register complaints to provincial courts on all sorts of matters, from property infringement to sexual violation.

Thousands of these court records survive today, and they demonstrate that the state acknowledged these complaints and attempted to rectify them. They could inherit and apportion property. They were allowed to collect taxes on a local level and invest it into simple manufacturing enterprises such as silk production or textiles. Certain sectors of the economy were dominated by women, particularly cotton spinning. In Mosul, women were so heavily involved in cotton-thread making that the men's-only cotton-weaving guilds appealed to the state to break their monopoly.

Kösem understood the freedoms and limitations placed on women in Ottoman society and was able to utilize and manipulate them like no one else. This was despite her humble origins. She was born on the Greek island of Tinos in 1590, at the time a province of the Ottoman Empire. As the daughter of a Greek Orthodox priest, she was raised a Christian with the maiden name Anastasia. Kösem was sold into slavery and purchased by a high-ranking Ottoman official in present-day Bosnia. Noting her beauty, he sent her to Constantinople, the Ottoman capital that the Turks had conquered from the Byzantines in 1453. She was 15 when she arrived and immediately brought to the imperial harem.

The harem was a large section of private apartments located on the grounds of Topkapi Palace. It consisted of more than 400 rooms. When Anastasia arrived, she met dozens of other intelligent, young concubines like her. They hailed from around the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Crimea . They were either captured in war or recruited within the empire for the harem as she had been. Upon arrival the girls were compelled to convert to Islam. Anastasia did as such and took the name Mahpeyker Kösem. Her first name meant “moon-shaped” in Persian. Today that would be a mean-spirited nickname for someone with an enormously large face, but back then it was a compliment on the celestial nature of her beauty. Her second name, given to her later by Sultan Ahmet, demonstrates her shrewd character for which she had already gained a reputation, as it meant

“leader, free, or independent.”

She was placed into the harem's rigorous education system, where she and the other inductees learned the disciplines of the palace. Prior to this time she had received little formal instruction, but in the harem she took lessons in theology, mathematics, embroidery, music, and literature. The most important lesson she gained, however, was in politics. The harem staff held enormous powerful as state administrators. They were typically eunuchs that supervised the female's quarters but also had influence on the palace.

By the 17th and 18th centuries they influenced state administration and palace bureaucracy because of their access to the sultan and his family. The leader of the harem, the Chief Black Eunuch, was sometimes considered the third-most powerful man in the empire, behind only the sultan and the Grand Vizier. The high-ranking women in the harem were equally powerful, as they had as much informal influence on imperial matters as the eunuchs. All of these figures gained their position through aggressive political jockeying. An impressionable, intelligent young girl like Kösem learned much in this environment, which was as cutthroat as a Wall Street investment firm.

The harem “cadets” were placed at the lowest rung of a viciously competitive hierarchy in which one earned a promotion by attracting the attention of the Sultan. Kösem began as a concubine and was not allowed to leave the palace without the permission of the Queen Mother *(valide sultan)*, the reigning sultan's mother and a former concubine herself. If she managed to share a bed with the sultan, which Kösem came to do with Ahmed I, she became a *gözde* (the favorite). If she continued to curry his favor, then she became *ıkbal* (the fortunate). A woman to whom the sultan wanted a permanent union would become one of his four wives (kadın). If she birthed him a son who went on to become sultan, she became the next Queen Mother. Through a combination of her intelligence, beauty, and attractiveness to Ahmet I, she quickly ascended the hierarchy and leapfrogged over the senior wives. Upon the enthronement of her son Murad IV, Kösem became the *valide sultan*, the Queen Mother.

She obtained this title at a time when the position of Queen Mother was more powerful than the sultanate itself. This time was known as the Sultanate of Women, a 130-year period in the Ottoman Empire in which the wives and mothers of the imperial harem held extraordinary levels of political power. They ruled informally through their weak sultan husbands or impressionable sons. Kösem had the

opportunity to exercise significant control. However, a political reform initiated by her husband, in which he changed the law of sultantic succession, would allow her to spread her rule over three generations.

For three centuries the Ottoman selection of princes worked according to a simple but brutal system. Young princes of the sultan were sent to distant provincial cities to rule as governors and learn the art of politics and administration. When their father died, the princes rushed back to Istanbul to be the first to claim the throne and earn the allegiances of high-level advisors and the military. Ottoman dynastic succession allowed any son of the sultan to be next in line for the throne. The empire did not practice primogeniture – the right for the first-born son to become ruler. This meant any son regardless of age could become the sultan. This also meant that any brother of the current sultan could take his throne if he could force him out of it.

A new sultan was aware of this perpetual danger. As long as his brothers lurked around in the empire, he faced the possibility of being deposed. Any sultan who reigned long enough would manage to offend some part of his population, who in turn could throw their support behind a challenger. Young Ottoman sultans accounted for this threat in the beginning of their reign in the most draconian manner possible. Upon being named sultan, all his brothers and pregnant concubines were killed in order to eliminate another claimant to the throne. It was always done by means of “the silk rope” of strangulation. Sultan Mehmet III (r. 1566-1595) killed an estimated 27 of his pre-teen brothers. The practice was rightfully considered barbaric by the public and routinely condemned. However, according to the political logic of the Ottoman dynasty it was an act of mercy on society and saved thousands of lives. It prevented the empire from plunging into civil war every time a claimant to the throne battled the sitting sultan for power.

This all changed with the rule of Kösem's husband Sultan Ahmet I. He had an insane brother Mustafa on whom he took pity and could not consign to execution. But he could also not let him live freely, since an enemy faction could rise up against Ahmet and place Mustafa on the throne. Ahmet struck a balance and sent him to live in confined quarters of an ornate section of the harem. Mustafa stayed in this luxurious but restrictive apartment until his death. These quarters became known as “the golden cage.” They were so effective in eliminating the threat of a dynastic rivalry that The Cage became precedent among sultans. Soon young princes stopped being sent out to the provinces in their youth and were instead placed in these

quarters. There they stayed from their birth until their accession to the throne. If they did not win the throne, they were kept there throughout their lives under strictly controlled conditions.

Being confined to a restricted space for the entirety of one's young life resulted in princes with poor mental health. Kösem's son Ibrahim was the most notorious example. He was kept prisoner here for all his life, except during his short, troublesome reign. This seclusion amplified his already-weak mental state from birth which had existed from birth. It caused his insanity to reach full bloom upon being released from The Cage and ascending the throne.

However, it presented Kösem an extraordinary opportunity to rule. She was a regent through her two sons, Murad and Ibrahim, and her grandson, Mehmet. This made her the de facto ruler of arguably the most powerful empire in Europe and the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire stretched from southern Arabia in Yemen to the north coast of Africa; from eastern Anatolia and the borderlands with Persian through Eastern Europe up to Vienna. It was the scourge of Western Europe, and many Christian rulers feared that it would overrun the continent and completely dominate them.

Kösem had to first overcome certain roadblocks in her political rise. When Ahmet died in 1617, the 28-year-old widow arranged for his mentally ill brother Mustafa I to rule, and she exercised effective power in the state during his three-month reign. Her adversaries deposed him in favor of the child Osman II, which was a setback for her. She was kept under custody in the Old Palace in the Bayezid district of Istanbul until young Osman was deposed and executed by enemy factions in 1622 at the age of 17. Her son Murad IV became the sultan in 1623, and she was finally able to exercise control over the empire.

Because Murad was only 11, his mother was named official regent and ruled for five years. Although the *valide sultan*s had gained enormous political power before, they had always ruled in an informal fashion as de facto advisors or administrators. Her stewardship of the empire, however, was the first time in Ottoman history that a *valide sultan* was designated the official regent of her son. She directly governed the empire. Kösem met with foreign ambassadors and learned of global politics. She also appointed political posts and was responsible for maintaining much of the state's administration. Kösem did so until Murad shook off the domination of his mother when he was 16. It was not easy for him to wrest control.

Kösem was not one to receive a setback passively. She still exercised great influence in state affairs when the young sultan was away from the capital. When the chief legal jurist of the empire disapproved of the way that Murad had a judge in the city of Iznik executed, Kösem communicated this fact to him and persuaded him to execute the chief legal jurist himself in retaliation. This was an act that had only occurred three times in the empire's history. Through his mother's counsel, Murad was able to accomplish much during his reign. He reconquered Baghdad in 1638. He put down rebellions throughout Anatolia and restored order in the eastern parts of the empire. As an aside, he was also an outstanding field commander with enormous physical strength, able to wield a mace weighting 60 kilograms (132) pounds. Chroniclers credit him with these reforms, but it is difficult to understand what was accomplished as a result of his work and what was accomplished by his mother.

Murad's reign came to a quick end. He was an excessive drinker (although he outlawed alcohol consumption whenever he could) and quite unhealthy, so Kösem kept her eye on other Ottoman princes through which she could rule upon his death. She particularly kept a close watch on her son Ibrahim, known to history as “Ibrahim the Mad.” He was born and remained in his gilded cell in his early years. Ibrahim was considered to have been touched by madness, and because he posed no direct threat to his brother’s sultanate his life was spared from execution. His brothers Süleyman and Kasım were not so lucky and ended up strangled by the silk rope. In the final days of Murad's reign, the sultan’s dying wish was to have Ibrahim killed. There were no others in the royal line to take the throne, but Murad thought it better to end the dynasty of Osman than to have a madman as sultan. Due to the intervention of Kösem this order was not carried out, and she saved the dynasty from extinction. Had she not done this, the empire would have been thrown into turmoil and possibly civil war.

When Ibrahim ascended the throne in 1640, Kösem knew her second son was not capable of rule and did her best to curtail his madness. It was not an easy task. Unsurprisingly, a shut-in who had been forced to live his early years as an extreme agoraphobe was poorly prepared to lead a transcontinental empire. He was prone to add bizarre theatrics to his rule. Ibrahim was intrigued with tales of rulers from antiquity and imagined himself to be the same. In “The Ottoman Centuries,” Patrick Kinross relates the story of Ibrahim developing a craze for scents and furs and wanted to acquire these by imposing an extremely

heavy tax on his subjects. He was inspired by stories recounted by his court members of legendary princes of old who covered themselves, their furniture, and their entire palaces in expensive sable pelts. He called upon his imperial council and military officials to collect them throughout the empire to make this dream a reality. They politely declined to execute this order and saw clearly the threat that he posed to the empire. Factions formed to depose this ruler with a more stable one, and the Queen Mother quickly leaped into action.

Kösem encountered her greatest challenges at the end of her son's reign. Ibrahim had surrounded himself with a number of power-hungry concubines and wives every bit as ambitious as his mother. His concubine Sechir Para in particular had significant influence over him due to his overwhelming attraction and preference for her. The story of how she entered the palace is worth recounting. Ibrahim had, over time, developed a preference for full-figured women. He then commissioned his advisers to find for him the largest woman in the world to add to his harem. What they found was a woman nicknamed Sechir Para (“Sugar Cube”), an Armenian woman weighing 300 pounds, an unimaginable size for anyone in the 17th century. Due to Ibrahim's obsession with her, she became quite influential and had his ear on political matters, much to the dismay of Kösem Sultan. She smothered him with attention, both figuratively and literally.

According to legend, Sechir Para told the sultan that one of his concubines was plotting against him, but she did not know which one. Despite having some of the girls in his harem tortured to give up this information, Ibrahim was unsuccessful in discovering the identity of the fictional woman who betrayed him. In a fit of rage, the sultan ordered his entire harem to be bound, sacked, weighed down and thrown into the Bosphorus. Only a handful of women were spared, including Sechir Para and Turhan Hatice, who birthed his first son.

As Ibrahim increasingly came under her influence, Kösem's standing in the palace diminished. She left the imperial palace to live in a summer house within the city. Kösem began to scheme with Grand Vizier Salih Pasha to dethrone her mentally unstable son. The sultan's advisors learned of this plot and moved his mother to the more remote Iskanda Celebi garden in Florya and had the grand vizier hanged. Soon other factions moved against the sultan, who had failed to manage state affairs properly. Military leaders conspired to have the new grand vizier killed. They, along with the new chief legal jurist and other leading officials, obtained the Queen Mother's consent for his dethronement. She did so, but first tied up the loose ends that kept

him attached to power. Kösem had Sechir Para strangled. She told Ibrahim that she had died unexpectedly. By then, several of his concubines had given birth to sons, which meant the Ottoman lineage could live on and Ibrahim was expendable. She secured his deposition, execution, and replacement by his seven-year-old son Mehmet IV in 1648.

Kösem again ruled the empire as regent through her grandson. He was the ideal sultan through which to rule. Mehmet was too young to effect change at the beginning of his reign and when he finally came of age was completely disinterested in government affairs. Mehmet's primary concern was with hunting and leading parties out on long expeditions. During his four-decade reign, he delegated most of his duties to his chief advisors. His hands-off reign had the unintended consequence of permanently altering the office of the sultan and weakening it considerably. But it left those in his court and inner circle with considerably more power, particularly Kösem Sultan, who was now entering her third decade of rule. In recognition of her unique role in leading the empire through generations of royal males she received the exalted title Büyük Valide – the “Grandmother of the Sultan.”

But holding power in Ottoman politics was always a difficult affair and required assembling a messy coalition of military figures, administrators, members of the ruling dynasty, and the religious elite. Kösem knew that her position was never completely stable. She finally met her match in another royal mother. This former concubine was equally skilled as the Queen Grandmother in her ability to manipulate the court: *valide sultan* Turhan Hatice, the mother of Mehmet IV. She rightly believed Kösem to be plotting to have him removed so that another of her grandsons could rule, particularly one with a less ambitious mother.

Kösem Sultan had secured the support of the Janissary Corps, an elite military unit that formed the backbone of the Ottoman army, and attempted to murder Mehmet IV and Turhan Hatice. They desired to replace Mehmet with his brother Süleyman, whose mother Saliha Dilaşub Sultan was more pliant and less likely to interfere in state matters. The younger *valide sultan* learned of this conspiracy and moved first. For the first time, Kösem Sultan was outgunned by a younger, faster rival. According to speculation, she was strangled herself with the silk rope by the chief black eunuch of the harem. Others even speculate that she was strangled by her own hair. She died in 1651 at the age of 61.

Kösem had been an informal advisor to one sultan and directly ruled the empire as a regent for three others. She stands above other queen mothers due to her longevity, ability to rule through multiple generations, and authority and respect with which the males leaders of the empire considered her. She had led the empire through turbulent times of warfare and political reform, maintaining the continuity of the empire when it threatened to fall apart. She was buried in the mausoleum of Sultan Ahmet in the grounds of the Old Palace.

Kösem left behind a contradictory legacy: one of manipulations and arranged murders within the palace, but kindness and compassion to the public. Kösem was aware of her dual nature by the end of her life. She was thought to have uttered the words: “I have chosen to let my poison out into the palace and give my milk to my people.” Istanbul's population officially mourned for three days due to the “milk” they gave her in the form of considerable humanitarian work. Much of her wealth and income was devoted to pious foundations and charitable institutions in the empire. Kösem had palace administrators seek out orphan girls, provide for their education, and arrange their marriages. She paid the debts of Muslims and non-Muslims consigned to debtor's prison. She was magnanimous to her slaves, whom she freed after three years of service. Some of the institutions she commissioned included shelters for travelers, public soup kitchens, and a large imperial mosque in the Istanbul district of Üsküdar, which still stands today. She also financed irrigation works in Egypt, the breadbasket of the empire, and disaster relief for the poor in Mecca. Her image as a humanitarian and benefactor still survives in Turkish popular imagination today in books and movies.

She is also perhaps the most successful example of a woman wielding power in a society when official high-ranking positions for women were non-existent. She showed that an ambitious female ruling through non-official means could be just as effective as a man doing so through formal ones. Furthermore, Kösem proved that intelligence and tact could allow someone from the lowest position to achieve extraordinary success. Her ability to stabilize the government and military earned the respect of the sultan's court. She had a bravado combined with proven strength and courage that also earned the devotion of many high-ranking male officials.

She was also a role model of sorts for women seeking to attain power. George Bernard Shaw perhaps envisioned Kösem Sultan's career when

he mused about universal suffrage. Although the Irish playwright firmly supported women's rights, he also realized that indirect female influence over men could be just as powerful: “Clever and attractive women do not want to vote; they are willing to let men govern as long as they govern men.”

It was a principle that Kösem knew well, and few did it better than she did.

Conclusion:

A Female Ruler in a Man's World

The story of women gaining power in the Middle Ages is one of dynastic accidents. In no nation in Europe or the Middle East did any kingdom or empire prefer to have a female ruler on the throne in preference to a male one. If a woman was in power, she typically ruled as an adviser to a child king. If she ruled in her own right it was because the alternative of being ruled by a foreigner or having the dynasty dissolve was considered far worse. Whatever the condition, a female queen was always, in one way or another, considered to be a less-than-optimal circumstance. This was true even if the female ruler led her kingdom into a golden age, as did Isabella I and Elizabeth of Tudor.

When they did come to power, it was rarely through the front door. As Guida Jackson notes in “Women Rulers Throughout the Ages,” they were placed on the throne and expected to fill the void by machinators that wanted them be puppets on strings. Then, when a male heir was present, they would peacefully hand over power and retire to a convent. But sometimes those puppets cut their strings and managed to access significant power, much to the chagrin of their handlers.

This was true in the distant past as well, although the role of powerful women in ancient or traditional societies is much debated. Some researchers at the extreme end of feminist scholarship have argued that matriarchs ruled in the distant past and created cultures free of war or acrimony. Feminine virtues of tolerance and compassion overrode masculine virtues of domination and competition. But while such ideas about the Sacred Feminine may round out the pages of a Dan Brown novel, these theories lack any historical or anthropological evidence. A few isolated incidents of continuous female rule do exist in west African nations. For example, the Baule tribe came about under the rule of Awura Pokou, as did Zaria by Turunku Bakwa. On the South Pacific island of Tonga, there were at least four ruling queens who took upon the royal name of Pomare. Queens could also share the power, wealth, and divinity of their husbands in such cultures as the Sumerian Dynasty of Anatolia in 2,500 B.C. But these reigns were short, quickly overthrown, often only amounted to co-rule, and were very much the exception in world history.

In the Middle Ages, women overcame these limitations through the concept of divine right; a monarch, whether male or female, is subject to no earthly authority and derives their right to rule directly from God. Although the queen was typically considered below the king, her status as a royal put her on a level that completely transcended her subjects, regardless of her gender. If a king did not have a son but still wanted to establish his dynasty, he would be willing to name his daughter to succeed him in homes that a male grandson would perpetuate his rule for generations to come. Nothing prohibited the succession of a female when there was no male heir. This condition arose in Scotland, England, Scandinavia, Italy's city-states, Portugal, Byzantium, or Outremer.

The queens under consideration in this book – Margaret of Denmark, Queen Elizabeth, and Lady Aethelflaed – squeezed as much power out of this concept as they possibly could. And those who only ruled as regent knew that bearing a royal title often meant less than knowing how to manipulate someone on the throne. Since the 5th-century fall of Rome in Europe, a queen mother was the dominant feature of the Middle Ages. Among the French Merovingians, the seventh century was considered to be a period of boy-kings and female rulers. Exemplified best by Kösem Sultan, these regents could manage to usurp power completely and act as central ruler of their state in all but name.

We have established beyond any doubt that women had access to enormous power in the Middle Ages and dispelled the notion they were passive damsels in distress. The question is, *how* did they rule differently than their male counterparts? Was there anything different about being a female ruler than a male ruler? Did becoming a powerful woman ruler mean than one had to mitigate her feminine attributes?

Not exactly. If it is one thing that these rulers have contributed to the medieval period, it may have been their gifts for reconciliation and tolerance. This time in history was a fractured one in which kingdoms perpetually broke down, shattered, and reformed, all under the aggressive warring and politicking of the continent's royal and religious classes. Figures such as Margaret, Elizabeth, Catherine, and Isabella were islands of tranquility and peace as their neighbors were engulfed in warfare. Elizabeth may have aggravated her ministers with her “wait and see” approach to governing, but she managed to avoid many internal and foreign confrontations between Catholics and

Protestants by means of her peaceful resolutions.

But female rulers in history and those under consideration in this book could also be fierce warriors in battle. With low expectations for women in combat, these warriors shocked their enemy with their heroics. Lady Aethelflaed was every bit as proficient as men in her society at combat and military strategy. She led cavalry charges into pitched battles and crushed Viking forces. Joan of Arc reversed decades of French military loss due to her tactical brilliance and audacious bravery. She led war councils and was repeatedly present when key military decisions were made. She forced those decisions to reflect her will. According to the testimony of her military comrades, the peasant girl was understood to be the driving power behind every aggressive move made by the French army. While other nobles preferred a meek defensive posture, she went on the offense and caught the English military position completely unawares.

Another important question to consider is the male response to these female rulers. Did they consider the reign of a confident female monarch to be a challenging of gender norms and a threat to male dominance on society? Medieval society was unquestionably patriarchal, as men controlled the ecclesial classes, the vast majority of political offices, and family life. Some outright protested their rule. We saw earlier in the chapter on Queen Elizabeth of the case of John Knox, who wrote a polemical treatise in the 16th century against the reign of women. And there were many to write against at the time. Queens had assumed the throne across the continent, in Spain, England, Scotland, France, Navarre, and the Netherlands.

Other male responses were more subdued. Most commentators believed that female royalty did not threaten the status of men. They believed so for two reasons. First, an effective queen ruled by submitting to men and exercising male virtues, even if she herself was not a man. This concept permeates a body of literature that arose to address this issue. It was called “a mirror for princesses,” which were advice manuals on the skills and character that a female monarch must possess in order to govern her people well. These authors argued that a women's rule should be based foremost on the imitation of and submission to men. In order to relieve men of the anxieties that their power was under threat in society, female rulers should exhort women to behave “as women” and submit to their fathers, husbands, or brothers.

The second reason is that, interestingly enough, this is what the

female rulers in this book did. Joan of Arc allowed no other woman to join the battle against England. She claimed that she herself would not have done so if it had not been for a direct command from God to take up arms. Catherine of Sienna compelled women to a life of modesty and virtue. Anna Komnene, after failing to take the Byzantine throne, spent the remainder of her life in a nunnery in quiet seclusion. Theodora compelled her husband to put down the Nika riots, but she did not want to wrest control from him and do it herself. It would be an anachronism to claim that any of these women desired to challenge gender norms and upend the social order of male-female relations.

These examples illustrate the somewhat contradictory nature of female medieval rulers. They were publicly subordinate to their husbands, if they had one, even though they might be the true ruler of a state. If their advocates complimented them at all, they did so by praising their “manly virtues.” If a queen birthed a son it could mean her dethronement. And the queens themselves were complicit in this system. Elizabeth boasted of her courage by claiming that, “I have the heart of a man, not a woman, and I am not afraid of anything.”

Yet as this book has shown, these royal figures had enough ingenuity and brilliance to win at a game weighted against them. They navigated the complex situation of being a woman ruler in the medieval world. And even if they lived in a world that could be quite misogynistic, even that could be used to their advantage. These women could even assert their authority by claiming that they were merely women – meek, pious, souls who posed little threat to anyone around them. And anyone foolish enough to believe it quickly suffered their wrath.

Elizabeth knew this strategy well, and she exploited it masterfully. When a doubter asked her if a member of the weaker sex was capable of strong leadership, she rebuked him in no uncertain terms. “Though the sex to which I belong is considered weak, you will nevertheless find me a rock that bends to no wind.”

Also by Michael Rank

From Muhammed to Burj Khalifa:
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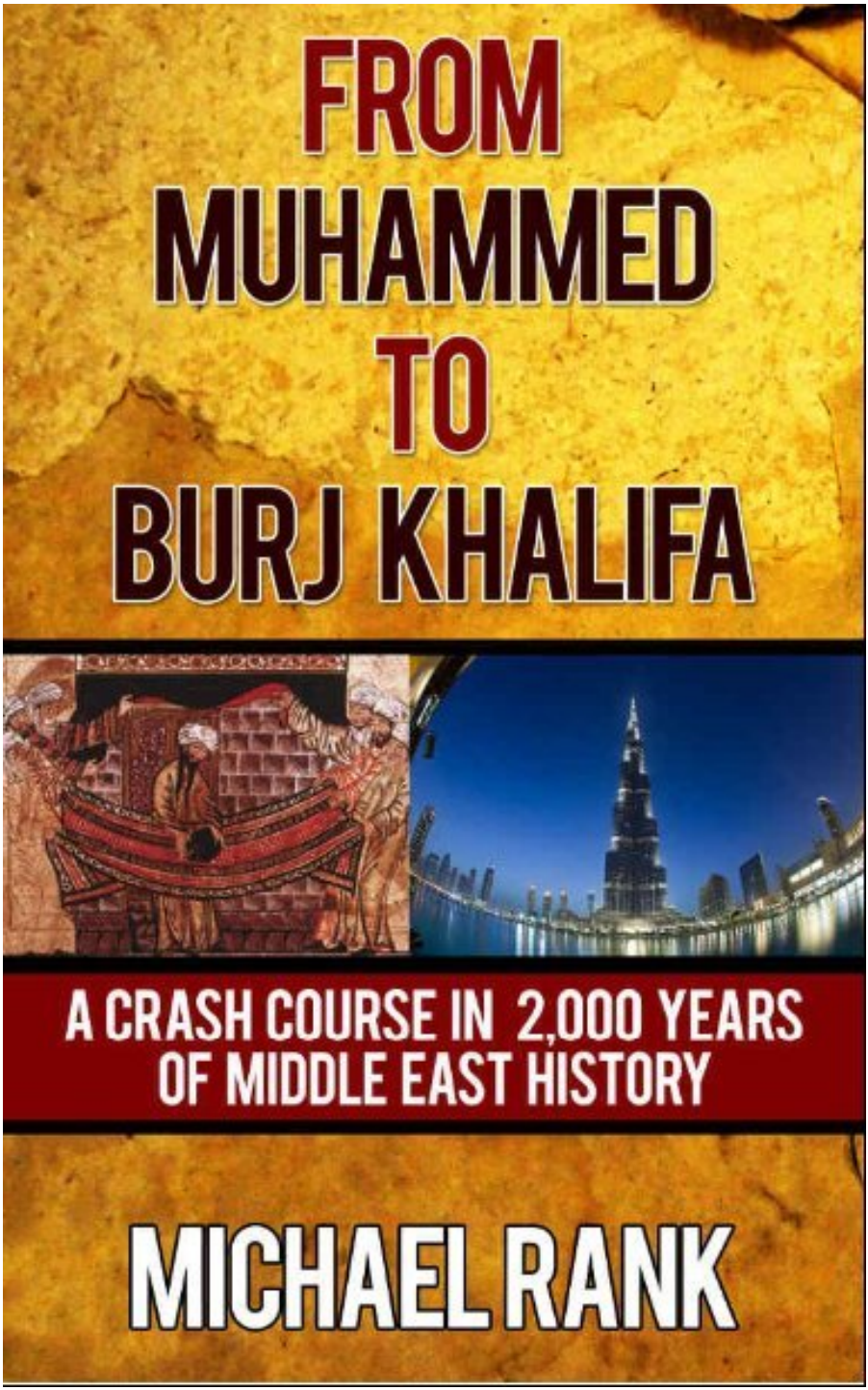

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Chapter 6: The Growth of Islam & The Split Into Sunnis and Shias

What is the difference between a Sunni Muslim and Shiite Muslim? If you don't know the answer then don't feel guilty - members of Congress, FBI officials, and counter-terrorism experts were asked this same question in 2006, and few could answer correctly. While the answer seems only important to Trivial Pursuit masters, understanding the differences is key to making sense of the constant infighting that takes place in the Middle East between Muslim groups (notable cases include the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, the former nation being Shiite and the latter Sunni, and the Iraqi insurgency in the late 2000s).

The origin of the split comes from the expansion of Islam. As Islam spread from Baghdad to France over a 100-year period, differences started to appear between Muslim groups, much like the split in Christianity between Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Protestants. After the death of Muhammed, the Muslim community chose a replacement as the leader of their religion. This person would be known as the Caliph ("successor" or "representative" in Arabic) and the domain of his leadership was known as the Caliphate. Like the pope of the Middle Ages, the Caliph maintained both spiritual and political power over his subjects. But unlike the pope, the Caliph was recognized as the universal head of his religion for only a few decades before the community split.

The first Caliph was Abu Bakr (632-634). He was among the first converts to Islam, and the father-in-law to Muhammed, who married his daughter A'ishah. The second was Omar (634-644), who led Muslim armies against the Byzantine Empire to the north and completely enveloped the Persian Empire in 636, which had existed for a thousand years. The third Caliph was 'Uthman (644-656). Under his reign the Caliphate expanded to encompass regions extending from Armenia to Algeria. He was also responsible for collecting the prophecies of Muhammed and compiling them into one book: The Qur'an. But he was not without dissenters. Many thought that 'Uthman had given an unfair proportion of the spoils of war to his own tribe. Consequently, he was assassinated by rebels and the reign of Ali, the Fourth Caliph, began.

The conflict between the tribes loyal to 'Uthman (which became the Ummayads) and the tribes loyal to Ali led to an all-out civil war in 657. The two groups ultimately declared a truce, but Ali's followers

were so angered with him for doing so that they assassinated him. The followers of Ali may have killed their leader but they were still loyal to his cause and felt marginalized by the Ummayads. Ali's sons Hassan and Hussein staged another battle against the Ummayads in 680 in Iraq. Hussein was killed and his martyrdom is central to the Shiite movement (pictures of him usually appear at protest rallies in Iran today).

The split between these two groups resulted in a 1,400-year division between Sunnis and Shias that persists to this day. Cultural differences have sprung up between them over the centuries. For example, Shiite boys are often named Ali or Hassan, while the names Omar, 'Uthman, or Abu Bakar are popular with Sunnis. Additionally, some ultra-orthodox Shias will whip themselves on the holiday of Ashura to commemorate the deaths of Hassan and Hussein. These differences even affect how these groups dress.

While your average Sunni and Shia look quite a bit alike, a pious Shia Muslim doesn't wear a necktie (Iran's bombastic prime minister Mahmoud Ahmadinejad never wears one in public)

End of this excerpt.

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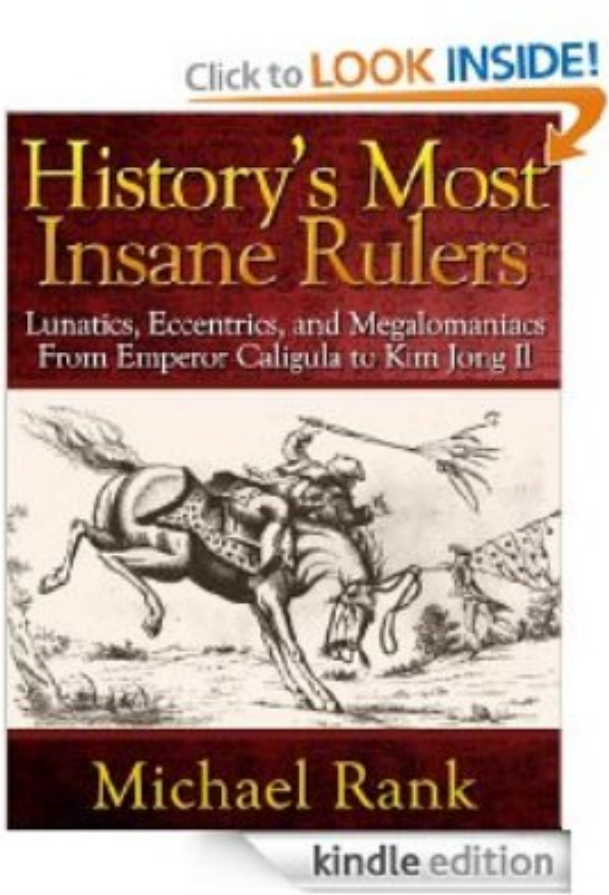
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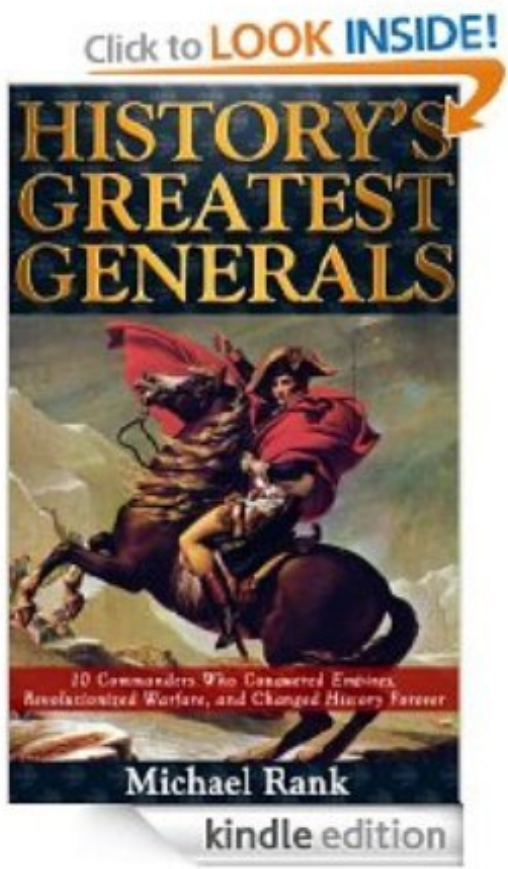
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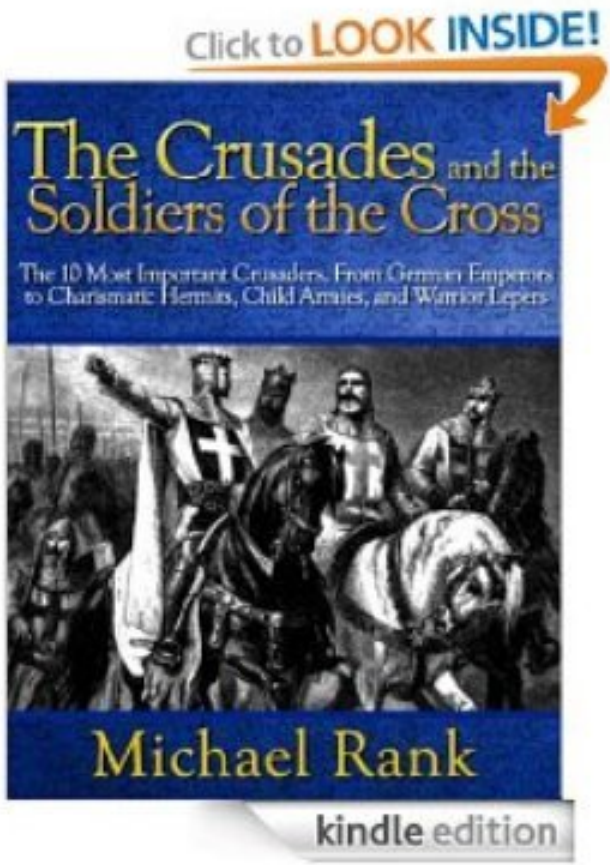
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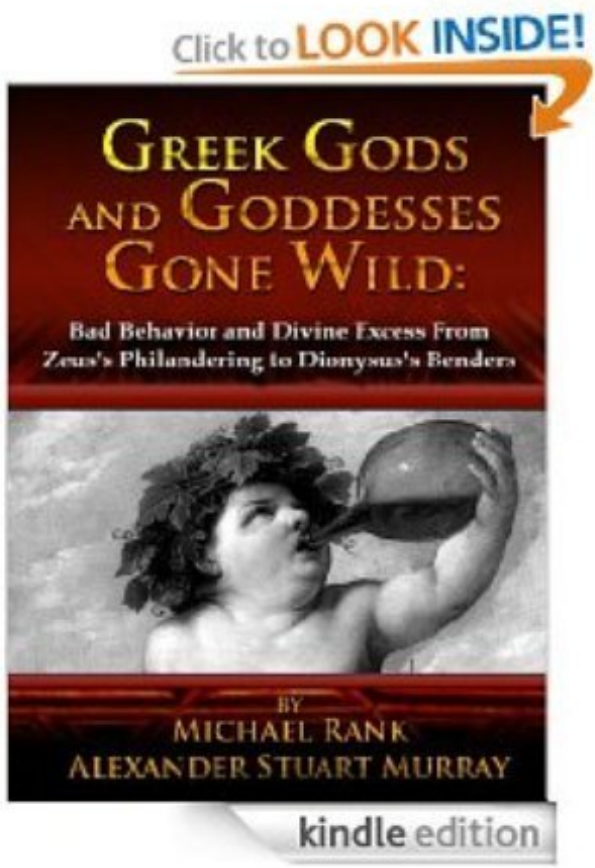
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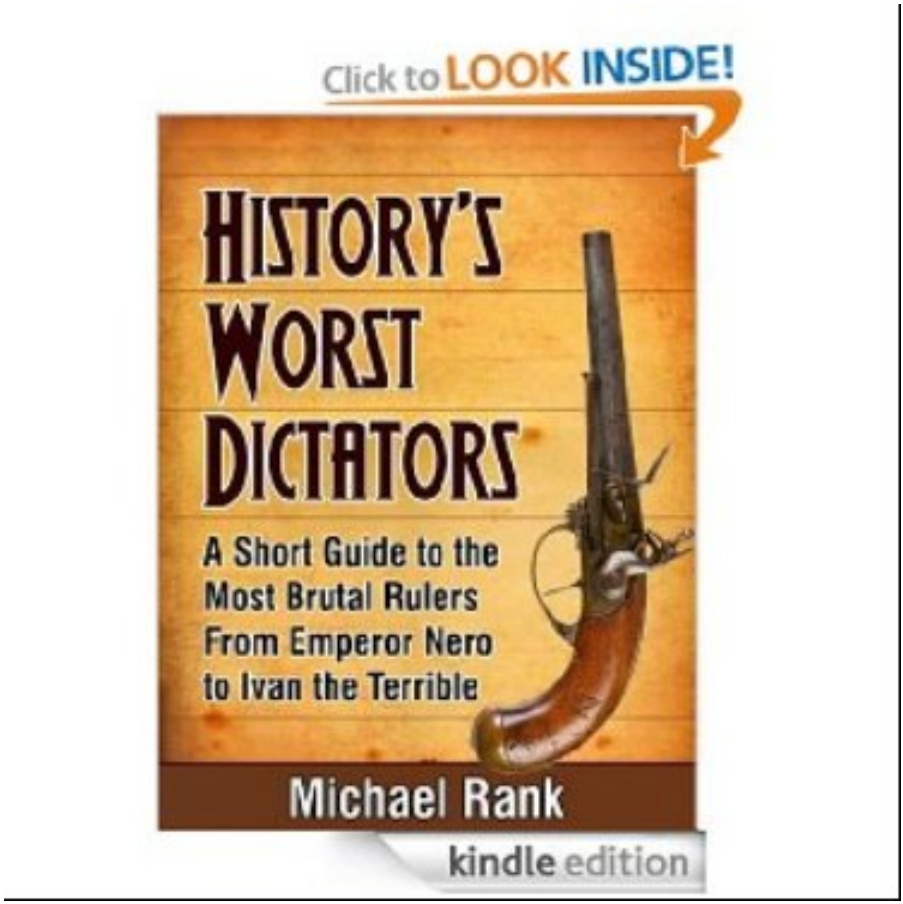
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About the Authors

Melissa Rank writes extensively on intercultural communication and health on her blog http://hungaryforturkey.wordpress.com. An avid traveler, she has taught English as a Second Language in many countries, including Indonesia, Turkey, Hungary and Rwanda.

She is currently enjoying taking care of her young daughter and navigating the terrain of motherhood, and unlike many of the women in this book, has no plans of taking over the country or the world any time soon.

Michael Rank is a doctoral candidate in Middle East history. He has studied Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Armenian, and French but can still pull out a backwater Midwestern accent if need be. He also worked as a journalist in Istanbul for nearly a decade and reported on religion and human rights.

He does his best to help out Melissa raise their daughter, whom he secretly hopes can one day be in a book like this. But he would like

her to seize power without having to go through all those marriages to surly men, of course. Michael is also the author of the #1 Amazon best-seller “From Muhammed to Burj Khalifa: A Crash Course in 2,000 Years of Middle East History,” and “History's Worst Dictators: A Short Guide to the Most Brutal Leaders, From Emperor Nero to Ivan the Terrible.”

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